

The Journey: へー、あゝあゝあゝあゝ・ あゝ・あゝ・ Hakuouki Enseiroku

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Summary: The world knows much of Kazama Chikage. He is a ruthless, arrogant creature, whose power is rivaled by few. But before the battle-lines of the Bakumatsu had been drawn, he was already a warrior who held the destiny of his family on his shoulders. What led him to such a path, and what caused him to walk it willingly? Prequel to The Quest: へー、あゝあゝあゝあゝ・ あゝ・ Hakuouki Tsuisekiroku.

1. Prologue

"Obaa-sama, let me out!" a boy cried, pounding at the doors of his room. There was nothing he could do to unlock the doors. His grandmother was the last one he had seen, and had instructed him not to leave his room unless she allowed him to do so. She would never lock him up alone before, even at his naughtiest, which was why he knew that something had gone wrong. Terribly wrong.

There was literally nothing in his room that could help him to escape, save for a porcelain vase, filled with moist dirt. He had gotten it ready to plant the strange red flower with five petals that his father tended to in the memory of his long-gone mother, but he knew that it would have to wait. Reaching for the vase with his small hands, he took it down from the cupboard it was placed upon and raised it high above his head.

After a few deep breaths, he took aim. Then, he closed his eyes, and remembered what his father told him the morning previous during his lessons. "Remember, my son, Ki is the basis of the existence of all living beings. Our people have our powers, because we have more of them, and can use them more efficiently than the humans. The more you cultivate it, the more powerful you will become." He concentrated, and focused all his internal energy on the vase, adding a silent prayer to whatever deity existed, to make his plan work.

With a great shout, he threw the vase towards the shoji door, which

broke into pieces. Wasting not a second, he ran towards the courtyard of his family's manor, but found no one there. There was not a sound to be heard, and not a soul to be heard.

He was about to turn towards another direction, the back of the manor, perhaps, when he heard a great crash coming from the main hall, where his family received their guests of honor. The sound reminded him of breaking furniture, and promptly guided him to where he needed to go.

As he came closer to the main hall, he started to see more and more silhouettes there. They were members of his large family, his cousins, uncles and aunts. But where were his father and grandmother? He could not see them, or sense their presence anywhere.

The boy started to run as fast as his legs could bring him. Crossing the courtyard never seemed so difficult, his destination further to him due to the deep sense of foreboding in his heart. Too many long seconds had passed, and panting, he finally reached the main hall. Pushing past the adults that blocked his way, he finally found his grandmother, who quickly drew him into her arms.

"Don't look, young one!" she warned, covering his eyes. Something bad was happening. He could feel it in his bones.

"Obaa-sama, where is Otou-sama?" he asked his grandmother, struggling against her strong hold. Although she was of a venerable age, she was still sprightly, holding an untold amount of strength if she wished to. "I want to see Otou-sama!"

A cold laugh cackled through the air, and his grandmother took a step back, taking him with her. It was the voice of his uncle, his father's brother. "Your father is no more, boy," he chuckled evilly, snatching the boy away from his grandmother. Held by the wrist, the boy could only gape in the utter shock at the sight of his father, in a pool of his own blood, his heart clearly punctured. "Soon, you will join him."

"How dare you!" the boy's grandmother shouted. "He is your brother's son! He is now the rightful head of our family, not you!" Tears descended from her eyes in rivers, but her words went unheeded. She endeavored to snatch the boy back from her son, but he pushed her back.

"Hmph, such a child is no challenge to me," the boy's uncle sniggered. "What can he do?"

The boy sobbed as he looked at the corpse of his father, but he knew that it would be the last time he had shown such weakness. He wiped away his tears with the sleeve of his silken yukata, and walked towards his father's fallen katana and picked it up. He did not speak, but aimed the katana towards his uncle.

"Do you even know how to use it, boy?" his uncle taunted further. "You've been hiding behind your grandmother's skirts for far too long."

He shouted. The boy gave a great, loud shout, and remembering his experience with the vase and the doors to his chamber, he

concentrated all his Ki onto his father's katana. He took the high guard, a default stance that his father had taught him several summers ago, and watched his uncle, who only raised an eyebrow at him.

When he no longer had the voice to call out further, he took a great step forwards, and found himself right in front of his uncle. Thrusting the katana forwards, he aimed for his uncle's heart, to replicate what he had done to his father. What followed was utter silence, save for a sickening splatter of fluid pouring out from a newly-punctured crevice.

The boy threw away the katana as his uncle knelt down and fell back, dead. He turned towards his grandmother and knelt down to her, seeing that she was too distraught for words.

"Obaa-sama, from now on, I will protect you, and everyone else in our family," he swore, his head held low as he prostrated himself to his grandmother, and the rest of his clan. "I'll become so strong and powerful that _no one_ will ever want to think of harming us."

His grandmother was silent, but put a gentle hand on his head, stroking his sun-gold hair that was now stained red with the blood of his traitorous uncle. "I know, child. I know," she replied. "You will make your father proud, my dear, brave Chikage."

* * *

><p>HAN: HELLO THERE! I've returned, and decided that instead of writing a sequel for The Quest: Hakuouki Tsuisekiroku, I'd write a prequel, curtailing Kazama's journeys that would lead him to meet Chizuru. Heh heh heh. I was struck by a sudden burst of inspiration, because I was watching Otomate Party 2012 and 2013, where both Hakuouki and Toki no Kizuna were featured at the same time. Itou Kentarou's Kazama Chitose made me very intrigued regarding his descendant's childhood, and thus, I decided to turn a little plot-bubble into a project.<p>

I do hope that you enjoy this as much as you've enjoyed The Quest!

2. The Awakening

Kamaza Chikage's eyes shot open and he rose from his futon covered in cold sweat, the images of the past dancing freely in his mind. Panting as he remembered the sight of his dead father, and the resulting anger, fear and trauma that led him to take his father's fallen katana to exact vengeance upon his uncle, he threw away his blanket and decided to exit his room to have a breath of the cool, night air.

The moon was full that night, glowing amber, surrounded by uncounted stars. Autumn was kind to Kagoshima, the seat of his family's influence and power, a bastion of safety to all those of his race in the surrounding regions. Ever since he was a boy, he had guarded his family as its head, thrust into a position of great power and responsibility at such a tender age. Now a man grown, his cares and worries did not end one bit. In fact, he sensed that they would grow, in an ever-increasing pace.

"Nightmares again, Kazama?" a deep voice intruded his thoughts. He looked towards his right, and found Amagiri Kyuuju, the third son of the Amagiri clan's head, sworn to his service ever since he took his late father's position as the head of his family. The two of them had trained and studied together ever since. Although on paper, Amagiri would be his lackey in every meaning of the word, but they regarded one another as brothers in arms, although they rarely showed it on their faces.

Kazama harrumphed. "I still cannot shake off that habit of having them," he replied. Amagiri had been one of the few who knew that he had those nightmares because of their close relationship. A long time ago, he had found them to be a source of terror, and now, he had learned not to fear them, but he found them to a source of weakness. Every time he had those nightmares, he had felt utter regret that he could not reach his father in time, even though he knew that it was high time for him to move on from the past.

"You must learn not to abide by them," Amagiri advised him, crossing his arms as he leaned against the balcony. "How long has it been since your late father passed on?"

"Sixty years," Kazama answered. Sixty years was roughly an entire lifetime of a human in that age, and he was barely considered a man grown. The Oni lived lives far longer than that of humans, but there was a time when the Oni were not wholly ageless. Assimilation with humans had thinned out their powers and their life-spans, but since the coming of the Tokugawa Era, following the madness and the chaos of the Battle of Sekigahara, the Oni Council had commanded the leaders of each Oni clan to distance themselves from humankind, and their blood began to run pure again. Sons and daughters lived longer than their parents, and now, those of his generation were expect to live for several centuries at most.

In those sixty years, Kazama Chikage had proven himself to be one of the most successful clan-leaders in recent times. With the increasing rebelliousness of humans that governed the Satsuma-han, he took a risk of cultivating silk in his family's lands, to be traded with the foreign ships that secretly docked in the ports of Kagoshima Bay, which in turn gave his family monetary access to items like medicine, and better crops to grow for themselves apart from the agricultural goods like giant radishes, tea, various oranges and rice-liquors. The Kazama family's village had become something like a self-sufficient establishment, a mystery to the denizens of the capital of the Satsuma-han, but also a boon to its economy. Hana, his illustrious grandmother, had seen to it that her grandson would become not only a formidable warrior, but also an ingenious administrator and steward of the activities of his clan, because they were the heads of the Oni in the western regions of Japan, having the allegiances of the Amagiri and Shiranui clans, although they all had equal voices on the Oni Council.

Yet he knew that all those achievements would be for naught, if not for a certain red mark on the list of expectations placed upon him. Already a man in the eyes of his people, and already able to ensure the security of his clan and lands, he still had one goal to accomplish. He would have to secure a wife, and if possible, a strong heir. His grandmother would prefer a girl-child and a boy for great-grandchildren, in that particular order. Nothing short of a

pure-blooded Oni female would do for his choice, and due to the lack in number of Oni females to start with, his quest for a fitting wife tarried ever longer without bearing fruit.

He had seen no need for a wife, because for sixty years he had led his family through a tumultuous time, having survived in-fighting from within his clan. When his late father was the head of the family, the administration of the clan was split with his uncle, and with the outcome of such an arrangement, he was not ready to delegate anything to anyone else, nor was he willing to put his life and the fate of his clan on the line. He would only give such duties to those he trusted with his life, and currently, he would only task Amagiri to the more logistical sides of his duties.

"So, you have finally tired of handling everything by yourself, and finally want to find a wife?" Amagiri asked. Those sixty years did not come easily for Kazama. Between weapons training, learning to govern a large village of close relatives in various holdings, and becoming politically savvy in the affairs of the Oni Council, there was not a moment when Kazama Chikage (and to some degree, Amagiri himself) had any opportunity to rest.

"The old goats only claim that I am overworking myself, they have no proof," Kazama answered, massaging his temples, as if he was nursing a headache. Despite the seemingly disrespectful pronoun he used for the elders of his clan, comprising of the five oldest and most venerable individuals bearing the Kazama surname, including his grandmother, who had watched over the clan for more than a full century, Kazama had no qualms putting them on the high pedestal all Oni elders were placed upon. If they could survive through the ages in such a chaotic world, they would certainly not to be trifled with. Looking towards the east, where the first light of dawn could already be seen from the seaward horizon, he exhaled a deep, labored breath. "They have chosen the daughter of the Yukimura clan for me."

Amagiri furrowed his eyebrow. "Is she not just a child?" he asked Kazama. A few years ago, the Yukimura clan, another clan on the Oni Council, of great and proud lineage, disseminated news of great happiness. A set of twins were born to the clan-leader, Chizo, a famed Oni-healer, and one benevolent to humans, and more importantly, the set of twins were fraternal. The older had been a boy, and the younger, a girl. Both were given names befitting of clan-leaders, signifying that they would both be trained to hold their father's office one day.

"Child or not, it's just a formality," Kazama said. Such was the tedium and irony of the Oni race. Too preoccupied with their own rituals and social structures, they would keep to the ways prescribed to their ancestors despite their great personal freedoms, because it was the only form of comfort for them, a diminishing race fighting to survive. There was completely nothing to stop him from taking any woman he wanted to as a wife, but Kazama knew that it was better that he took a female who had the same pure Oni blood as he did, for Oni married for life. It would be counter-productive if he married a woman only to have her die halfway through his lifetime, and he would be forced to take up all the work again. Of course, if the girl were to have chosen another in the future, she would be free to cancel the engagement. Kazama would just have to pursue her to the ends of the earth in order to achieve his goals.

The home of the Yukimura clan was deep in the mountains of Japan's eastern plains. Their territory was not as wide as that of the Kazama's beachfront lands, but they guarded several sacred rivers blessed by whatever deity that watched over their race, and the waters of those rivers were said to be able to cure every sickness known to the world. So clean and pure were the waters of the Yukimura village that they glittered in the sunlight—or so the legends ran.

Kazama was acquainted well with Yukimura Chizo, who was slightly older than he was. There was many a time when he had written to Yukimura, asking advice that only those of their station could answer. The only difference between them, was that Yukimura was a known sympathizer of humans. The humans who lived nearby the Yukimura village went there in droves to learn the secrets of their medicine, but were granted nothing. Instead, Yukimura ensured that the Oni under his command would never turn a human down in need. Kazama, on the other hand, was content to let them rot as they so deserved, being the monstrous, destructive people they were. There could not be two more different individuals.

"We leave for the Yukimura village this afternoon," Kazama told Amagiri. A ship had already been prepared to bring the elders of not only the Kazama clan but also the Amagiri elders, who would act as witnesses for the groom. The royal clan, the descendants of Suzuka Gozen, would do the same for the Yukimura family. The very fact that he had no hand in the preparations of the journey towards the Yukimura lands spoke volumes that his clan elders never wanted to give him a choice in any of the arrangements made.

"You seem unwilling to get on with it," Amagiri commented, noticing a slightly more pronounced scowl on Kazama's face. However, this would not be the first time he was forced to secede to his family's wishes. The elders of his clan were a wily, sneaky bunch, knowing that he would refuse any suggestion or opinion they had.

"It is unnecessary," he replied and turned back towards his room. He needed to pack for the journey as well, and luckily for him, his grandmother was often very approving of the wardrobe that he had chosen for himself. He would be wearing the colors of his family, gold, red and black to the betrothal ceremony, and would have to coordinate his clothes according to those colors.

It did not take him too long to pack what he needed, from his clothes, to several books that would keep him company during the seawards journey to Edo, and then towards the Yukimura lands on foot. His preferred subjects had been history and politics, because they told him much of the folly of humans, necessary tales of cautions, written by masters from Japan and China, as well as several translated volumes from Western thinkers. The more he read, the more he realized that humans were born on this earth to devour one another, and they left the world in ruins in the wake of their greed. He remembered that his grandfather had made it his life's work to heal the land of the hurts sustained during the Battle of Sekigahara, fought in the year 1600, but the shocks made onto Nature took even longer to recover. Seedlings became weak as the result of hastening the harvests to feed the many soldiers needed on both sides, the human blood that stained the soil during and after the battle—Sekigahara had been such a small area in Japan, yet—the effects sustained by that small plot of land that barely held any life

reverberated all through the nation, and the humans were still blind to their follyâ€|

Even now as he and his family were moving towards a new age of stability, he had heard news of a new shadow that would soon pour over their nation. The presence of foreign ships had been a sight of normal occurrence in Kagoshima and in Hagi, but those ships were trading ships, bringing goods into the Japanese black-market, because Japan's doors were still closed to foreigners. Things were different in Edo, however. The foreign ships that were spotted at the eastern coasts of the country were ships of military nature. Strange flags, those belonging to faraway countries from the West each marked the ship's masters, for whatever reason they were there. He knew that he would have to act quickly, and that merely finding an excellent wife and siring strong heirs would not be enough to defend his family, and perhaps, even his people in the longer run.

"What should I do, Otou-sama?" he asked the lone rose-plant he had tended to in gardens of the Kazama manor, just a few moments after he had finished packing. The rose was not a plant native of Japan. It had been given to his mother by a travelling Chinese Oni trader, who had been a guest at the manor due to his breeding, as a token of thanks for their hospitality. His mother had loved it so much that she had it planted right away, and when she had passed in childbirth, his father had taken care of it in her memory. He had always associated that rose as his father's love for his mother, and revered it as if it was his father. "Can you see the storm-clouds gathering over our heads wherever you are now?"

Of course, the rose did not reply. Its red petals merely stared blankly at him. The result would be the same if he asked his father's tombstone instead.

"Please tell me that your silence means that I should find my own way, and that you want to rest in the netherworld with Oka-samaâ€|" he scowled sarcastically. To his surprise, a gust of wind blew around him, making the plant's stems sway back and forth, making it look as if the rose was nodding its little head in answer. "Hmph, suit yourself," he replied himself, and went on his way.

If he tarried any longer, his grandmother would not forgive him at all.

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><p>HAN: If you read my Hakuouki fics, particularly The Quest, you'll realize that the Kazama Manor is still the one on Kagoshima's beachfront, and not the one on Sakurajima. I would expect that moving and uprooting a large village like the Kazama village would be a logistical nightmare and would take some time to complete, heh heh! I actually wanted to use Kazama's given name in this fanfic, but for some reason... the thought did not stick at all. Oh, and by the way, is there actually ANY real reference as to where the Yukimura lands are exactly?<p>

Elonore: I thank you for being around to read this one as well! Heh heh heh, I think that there would be slightly more Kazama/Chizuru moments in this one, although they would be less of a lovey-dovey nature, and more of the kind we see in Sekkaroku. ^_^ I hope you enjoyed this chapter as well!

OnikuShita: Poor, poor Chikage has been quite neglected by the community, so I decided to give him a little justice! I hope he had more material to play with from the anime and the games, though.

Rei Eiein: Well, there must always be a root for his personality ^_^ He's definitely a bastard for a reason!

3. The Assembly

The three-day journey on the ship from Kagoshima to Edo wasâ€|bearable. Thankfully, no one disturbed Kazama throughout the voyage, and he was able to collect his thoughts. The rumors he had heard were true, and there had been an increased foreign naval presence upon Japanese waters. Amagiri's informants at Nagasaki had claimed that they were there so that they could be repaired, and so their sailors could find respite upon land before heading towards China and Russia. Those claims were then proved to be false with the fact that new factories have emerged in Nagasaki, opened by those foreigners, manufacturing new Western firearms. He was sure that there would be some amount of chaos if the Westerners who landed on Kyushu went unchecked by the Bakufu. The Japanese did not take such blatant show of strength lightly, and would most likely see it as a challenge to their authority in their own lands.

"What are you thinking about, Chikage?" Hana asked her grandson as soon as they disembarked the ship that brought them to Edo.

"The folly of humans, Obaa-sama," Kazama replied. There was an air of unrest, thick among the humans. It had spread from the port-cities of Kyushu to the heart of the Bakufu in Edo, and he knew that with no uncertainty that it had everything to do with foreign naval ships. He did not know much about Western politics, but he knew much of his own country's to predict that nothing good would come from this exchange.

Hana chuckled. "You seem to do little else these days, my boy," she said. It could not be helped that her grandson thought lowly of the humans, who had forced their kind into hiding due to fear and greed. There had been a time when humans and Oni lived together in peace, but the humans, knowing that the Oni were nigh-Immortal, and damned near impossible to kill, feared them and started to conspire to drive them into non-existence. No self-respecting and self-loving Oni would ever seek to tie themselves to the humans now, although temporary alliances could not be avoided. Yet, Hana knew that with the sudden boldness of the pink-skinned humans that she had seen, coming into Japanese waters in big, black ships, she knew that a new reckoning would come to their country, and not even the Oni could escape it.

"Let us be free of such unproductive thoughts," the head of the Amagiri clan, Kazutarou said. "Your focus should be managing the terms of the alliance your clan with that of the Yukimura." Political marriages were political marriages, whether the bride and groom were Oni or not. The terms of betrothal would be carried out from the moment the agreement was settled. The Yukimura clan was as powerful in the East as the Kazama was in the West, and a union of both clans would mean a great exchange of either trade, service or martial matters.

Kazama rolled his eyes. Amagiri's oldest brother was highly critical of him, despite them being equals. Perhaps critical was not the keyword of his non-confidence in him, but it should be noted that being vassals of his clan, the fates of Amagiri were tied to that of his. "The terms have already been drafted," he said. "They will be revealed during the ceremony." They were in the territories of the Yukimura clan, with eyes and ears in every corner possible. If the other party heard the terms of the arrangement, they could alter theirs to make it more profitable for themselves.

Hana chuckled. "What I fear is that you will relent to what the Yukimura clan wants the moment you see your future bride," she teased her grandson, who scowled in response. It was true that young Chizuru was only a child, but news of her beauty had already spread far and wide. That could not be helped, since her mother was also a great beauty, a descendant of the Suzumori clan, another clan that was on the Oni Council. "Five year-old girls have their charm, you know."

"Perhaps we should turn back and wait ten more years then," Kazama said, not bothering about propriety when rebuking his grandmother. "I have no interest in taking a child-bride."

"Suit yourself," Hana returned. "However, if the Yukimura clan comes knocking at our door, demanding a groom for their daughter, you shall be the one to answer the call." She knew that Kazama was aware that there was only one Oni girl that had pure blood in this generation, and she knew that Kazama would welcome the girl as his bride for that sole reason alone. He would marry the girl even if he would not come to love her, because it was what his clan needed. Her grandson did not agree to a match with young Sen-hime of the Yase clan, because he did not relish being tied to the whims of the ruling clan of their people directly, and thus, little Yukimura Chizuru had been his only choice for a wife.

Amagiri cleared his throat before Kazama could say anything. "It is getting late, we should continue moving if we are to reach the Yukimura village in time," he suggested respectfully, his head bowed towards Hana. After spending so many years by Kazama's side, Amagiri learned that the most effective stratagem of stopping Kazama's explosive anger from building up and imploding would be to divert his attentions. The years may have mellowed Kazama somewhat, but there was no harm in using his old stratagem. Besides, it would be wise not to delay their travel, to ensure that their hosts would not be kept waiting.

"You still have much to learn from Kyuuju, my grandson," Hana reminded Kazama when he prepared their horse. "Patience being one of them."

"I try, Obaa-sama," Kazama replied, feeling his blood cool as the moments passed. It would be a long journey to the Yukimura village indeed.

* * *

><p>It was a three-day journey upon horseback from Edo Bay to the Yukimura homelands. They were the masters of the Oni in the Tohoku regions, the reach of their influence in the north-eastern

territories were as great as that of the Kazama in the south-west. While the lands of the Tohoku were considered to be the granary of Japan, the fruits of its forests held many secrets, and the Yukimura clan knew every one of them, becoming renowned healers and doctors.<p>

The head of the clan, Yukimura Chizo, was one such individual. He was an Oni-leader who preferred diplomacy and friendship over martial action. The humans in the surrounding areas did not fear nor hate the Oni, but were all grateful for the services that Yukimura and his family provided to them. Kazama often scoffed at his idealist leanings, but there was no doubt that he respected Yukimura, for being able to stand by his beliefs despite the clearly evident truth that humans were ingrates and would turn on him whenever it suited them.

"I hear water," Hana exclaimed with a wide smile. They soon came a meadow in the mountains, wide as the eye could see, where the grass was as green as the emerald leaves in the forests that they had passed, adorned with flowers of every hue imaginable. The meadow was cut into sections by a series of interconnecting streams that came from a nearby mountain, and the legends were true, its waters were so clean and pristine that one could imagine that the water was glittering as it ran downstream.

The Yukimura village was built right in the center of the great meadow. Its buildings were without fences or walls, and was open to all who would come. An Oni like Kazama could have fretted at the lack of defenses about the village, but it was of no concern to its rulers. Children frolicked and played freely while their parents watched on, while there were rows and rows of medicinal plants growing as abundantly as the agricultural crops of the Kazama village, tended to by carefully trained hands.

At the very center of the village was the Yukimura manor. Its permanently-open doors were painted a deep sapphire hue, and just a few feet away from it, were Yukimura Chizo and his retinue, dressed in the clan's colors of white and green. Of medium height and build, Yukimura had kind, brown eyes and hair cut so short that they seemed to stand on end, in a strange hue that seemed olive-green under the sunlight. At his side was his wife, Natsuko (née Suzumori), a former bodyguard and advisor to the current Yase-hime, having retired from such duties once she was wedded to Yukimura. Like the beauty of the Yukimura village, the tales of her beauty were all true. Blessed with snow-white skin and luscious chestnut hair worn in a braid adorned with flowers, her piercing eyes were emerald in color.

"The Yukimura clan welcomes our guests, the Kazama and Amagiri clans of the Satsuma-han," Yukimura greeted his guests with a low, formal bow. "My wife and I welcome you to stay as long as you wish."

"You honor us," Kazama replied, and performed the necessary greetings in reciprocation. He noted the manner in which Yukimura had held his wife's hand and continued, "Matrimony suits you, Yukimura. You seem to be aglow with it." He had not seen Yukimura ever since he had returned to his lands to marry Natsuko, and was willing to risk a little mischief in his reunion with his old friend.

Yukimura let out a hearty laugh following Kazama's jest. "Is this how you speak to your future father-in-law, young Chikage?" Yukimura

asked. "Clearly, Hana-baa has not been able to fully rein you in yet."

"That would be an understatement," Amagiri Kazutarou interjected with a light bow. "Chizo, I thank you for your hospitality in these coming days."

"Do not mention it, Kazutarou," Yukimura replied. He then gestured towards his wife, and introduced her to all of his guests. "This is my lovely wife, Natsuko, from the Suzumori clan. Her great-grandaunt was Suzumori Yukina, who fought in the Battle of Sekigahara with my ancestor, Kazuya." After three generations, the Yukimura and Suzumori clans were tied once again in matrimony, and such greatness in their blood would certain show in Yukimura and Suzumori's children.

"It is an honor to have all of you as our guests," Natsuko said, performing the greeting-bow. Through her emerald eyes, glowing wild and free, Kazama could sense that Natsuko had not been a woman of peace as her husband was, because the very fact of the matter was that the Suzumori clan was just as militant as his own. How Yukimura had managed to capture such a free spirit, he would never know, but somehow, deep inside him, there was a sense of relief, because if anything happened, he knew that Natsuko would rise to the occasion in the defense of the Yukimura village. This much was inherent within her.

After the pleasantries were exchanged, the guests were brought into the main hall of the Yukimura manor, where the current Yase-hime was waiting for them. Senya was her name, a petite woman who exuberated power nonetheless. She would be the officiator of the betrothal ceremony that would commence the next day.

"It is a joyous occasion to see so many clans gathered in one setting," Senya said. Of the ten clans in the Oni Council, four were gathered there. There was nothing more unifying, more encompassing than a wedding, or rather the promise of one to come. "Chizo, Kazutarou, Chikage, I have not seen all of you together in many months" and Hana-baa, it is good to see you again." The four addressed bowed in reply, and after that, the last of the day's formalities were completed.

The clan elders of the Yukimura, Kazama, and Amagiri were then ushered into another room to talk amongst themselves, leaving the younger generation some privacy to discuss their own affairs. The very moment the elders left, sake was served. The first thing Kazama did was to turn towards Yukimura. "Yukimura, answer me honestly, did you want to go through this arrangement?"

"Why would I not?" Yukimura asked him in return, draining his cup of sake, raising an eyebrow as he looked back towards Kazama. "Even if you're not one of the richest families amongst us, you are one of the best swordsmen in the Oni Council. If you marry my daughter, her future would be secured, and I would have less of a worry in my lifetime."

Kazama rolled his eyes. "Yukimura. You always finish your sake in one go when you are lying. Out with it." Once his father had passed on, Yukimura was sent to Kagoshima to help him get through that difficult period of mourning, and ever since then, they had been close friends, and he knew everything there was to know about him.

"Most likely, you were forced to this alliance by someone else," Amagiri said. "Natsuko-san, tell us the truth."

Natsuko sighed. "It was Chizo's uncle," she answered. "He said that with the influx of the presence of the Westerners in our waters, the Bakufu would be plunged into instability. He wanted our clans to be united, to ensure that at least the Oni of the East and West would be safe."

It was obvious that Yukimura did not enjoy such talk. "Even if the humans wanted to do anything untoward to each other, they would not harm us. We have nothing to do with them at all," he reasoned.

"When war rises, the humans need medicine the most," Amagiri Kazutarou said. "They are using you, Chizo." No one ever questioned Yukimura's rule, only that he was too soft-hearted towards the humans. Then again, he was a doctor, and doctors were all compassionate souls, riddled with the fact he and his family had become pacifists over the ages.

Yukimura showed signs of not wanting to continue the discussion any further, and thus the subject was changed. "What about a bride for your son then?" Senya asked.

This time, Yukimura let out a full, roaring laugh. "That boy is destined to be a warrior, by the looks of him. I have full confidence that women would come to him in droves when he is a man grown." He seemed to be very proud of his children, even if they were only five. Noting the confused expression on Kazama's face, he slapped him on the back. "Ah, but you won't understand this until you are a father, right, Senya-dono?"

Senya chuckled. Senya had a daughter herself. The father was not an Oni from a powerful clan, but Senya had married for love. "Right indeed, Chizo," she replied. They were lucky, the Oni leaders of their generation. All of them had grown in a close circle, although they were of various ages, and were able to talk freely in private.

"Your daughter is only five," Kazama retorted, scowling towards Yukimura. "You expect grandchildren out of her at this age?"

"You misunderstand my husband, Kazama-san," Natsuko answered. "If you marry our daughter, you won't face the ages of the world alone, and, she would have a good husband. That is a well-thought plan after all." It was said that apart from being beautiful, Natsuko was also somewhat of a clairvoyant, able to see many years into the future. There was no doubt that she would have already seen into her daughter's future.

"Who knows, you would fall for her the moment you see her?" Yukimura added.

"Yukimura,"

"I was just kidding, Chikage."

* * *

Megingjoro/ArYa: Naaaw, I have not given up on it at all! I personally was very intrigued by this pairing because I quite love to ship leading ladies with villains. I've already watched the first movie, and OMG, the anime pales in comparison to it. It's just more brutally violent, and focuses much more on the characters despite being only 1 1/2 hours long. In short, it was very well done!

Moons-chan: Thank you! I chose "The Journey" this time around, because it implies Kazama's journey towards Chizuru, right to the moment of the prologue in The Quest. ^_ ^

www.L.O.V. : Ah thanks! I hope you'll stick around in the future as well! (Oh I looked at your profile and found out that you're Singaporean. How are you ah? HEH HEH HEH - Am Malaysian, so... yeah. Can't help but flaunting our similar accents ^_ ^)

4. The Betrothal

Dawn came, and as the first light of the sun touched the roof of the Yukimura manor, everyone was assembled at the main hall. At the head of the hall, seated upon two chairs, were Senya, the current Yase-hime and Kazama Hana, the matriarch of the Kazama clan, a natural arrangement, because Senya was their ruler, and Hana was literally the oldest being in the hall, and also Kazama Chikage's grandmother, making her a very well-respected person in the Oni community.

"Today we are here to negotiate the terms of betrothal between Kazama Chikage, leader of the Kazama clan, and Yukimura Chizuru, heiress to the Yukimura clan," Amagiri Kazutarou announced after Senya nodded to him to start the ceremony. At his words, the members of both clans present at the main hall bowed to one another. Kazama was seated at the very front of his retinue, dressed in a burgundy yukata, and a black haori with a golden obi. Beside him was the katana, Doujigiri Yasutsuna, the heirloom of the Kazama clan, used to slay the marauding Oni, the Shuten-Doji centuries ago.

Seated opposite him, was Yukimura Chizo, flanked by his older son, Kaoru. Both of them were dressed in hues of dark emerald, and by Chizo's side was the Daitsuuren, the heirloom of the Yukimura clan, while Kaoru held the Shotsuuren, the wakizashi that came with the Daitsuuren, forming a pair. It was a subtle hint to the other clans that were present that Yukimura was already starting to train his son in the leadership of their clan.

Soon, the ringing of the bell summoned the little bride-to-be in. Young Chizuru came into the hall, holding Natsuko's hand. She had a yellow flower tucked into her ear, and was wearing a yukata that matched that of her mother's, one that was green like meadow they lived in. Her large, doe-like eyes were the color of honey, like that of her father, while her fair skin and chestnut hair mirrored her mother. At this tender age, she was undoubtedly an adorable child, but she held the promise of time. There was no doubt that she would one day be a great beauty, equal to that of her mother. Mother and daughter bowed to all that were in the main hall, and when they joined Chizo and Kaoru, they bowed towards the guests of their house, and more importantly, towards Kazama, who would one day be Chizuru's husband.

Thence started one of the most solemn of Oni ceremonies, for it involved not only the promise of two souls to be joined in matrimony, but also two clans. To the outsider, it would seem as if the Kazama clan was buying a daughter-in-law and the Yukimura clan making sure that they fetched the highest bride-price possible.

"My clan will give yours the expertise of our militia so as to train

yours in the defense of the village," Kazama said, making the first offer. The clans of the Kyushu region were all famous for their skill in battle, and the warriors of the Kazama clan were held in the highest regard. He studied Yukimura's expression, and knew that the proposition did not sit well on his friend's mind. However, it was Yukimura's uncle that sighed in relief with the offer. It was for that very reason he even suggested the union in the first place.

Although he showed no hint of agreeing or rejecting Kazama's first offer, Yukimura said, "Then mine will provide training to your healers in all we know." He had blatantly skirted the issue of the exchange of military training for his clansmen, and he knew that every single eye in the hall were trained upon him, getting ready for his explanation. "I do not wish for a strong martial presence for my people."

"Chizo, we would have no way of defending ourselves if we do not accept Kazama-san's offer," Yukimura's uncle admonished him. "Do you wish us all to be burnt by the humans one day?" A great silence washed over the hall at the inauspicious words uttered, and even Chizuru and Kaoru, both children, blinked their wide eyes with unease.

"Very well then, I shall modify the offer," Kazama said. "In exchange for the training from your healers, I shall send my best illusionists to advise you on how best to hide your lands in any event of the humans' hostility." Even more famous than the warriors of the Kazama clan, were their illusionists. It was said that those who had never once entered the Kazama village could never find it, even if it was smack in the middle of the beach at Kagoshima bay, and the edge of the city.

That offer made Yukimura smile. "Done," he said, and put his hand on his daughter's shoulder. "It looks as if Chikage is very happy to have you, little one."

Chizuru had no inkling that her father was only using her to tease Kazama, but at that moment, she was silent, looking into Kazama's hard, ruby eyes, as if trying to find the truth to her father's words for herself. Looking into those large, brown eyes, Kazama immediately found no ability to even scowl at her father. He only made a half-smile and offered a similar jest.

"You will be forever remembered as the father who willingly sold his daughter for a meagre price, Yukimura," Kazama replied slyly. "What would your daughter think of you when she finds the terms you agreed on?"

"She would thank me, no doubt," Yukimura returned. "Chizuru-chan, Otou-sama is trying his best to make sure that your future husband takes care of you and our family in the future, do you understand?"

It was evident that Chizuru could not comprehend one word that her father had said. "Hai" she said softly, with an over-enthusiastic nod of her head. She then whispered into her father's ear, "Otou-sama" Chikage Onii-sama looks very scary"

It turned out that her whisper seemed to be a little louder than she

had expected, and Kazama could hear what she said, and grimaced the slightest bit. Both Hana and Senya tried to maintain their dignified composure, while Yukimura gave little care and laughed heartily at his daughter's observation, breaking the solemnness of the supposed ceremony. Knowing that Kazama's ruby eyes were upon her, Chizuru bent her head down, not daring to look at him again.

"Come now, Chikage, the words of children mean no evil," Yukimura comforted Kazama, petting his daughter's head. Knowing that he was right, Kazama decided to let little Chizuru's transgression slip and continue with the ceremony. "Now, let me seeâ€¦ what can we do for the wedding gifts?"

A cousin from a branch-family came up and reported that they had prepared 20 large vats of medicinal sake, five stalks of ginseng-roots that were a thousand years old, five trays of the rarest medicinal herbs known in Japan, along with 50 bolts of silk ever since Chizuru was born. Those would come to Kazama clan with their bride when Chizuru was of marriageable age. One by one, the goods mentioned by Yukimura's cousin were presented to all those who were present, bringing much awe to those who seen them, for those gifts could not have come easily

According to Oni traditions, Kazama's bride-price must match the value of the gifts that Chizuru brought with her. All exchanges must be of equal or higher value, and there was no mistake that the Kazama clan was easily able to match the extravagant gifts promised by the Yukimura. "Then I offer 5000 ryou in exchange," he said, and silence covered the entire hall. One ryou in gold was equivalent to one koku in rice, which was the amount needed to feed a person in a full year. The value he had offered was more than enough to cover the value of the wedding gifts, which once again cemented the fact that both the Kazama and Yukimura clans were among the most powerful and able Oni clans in all of Japan.

After the monetary aspects of the negotiations had ended, came the dates of the actual wedding, and other things like the invitations, the seating arrangements, the guest listsâ€¦ Every single item had to be properly accounted for, which made the ceremony a laboriously long process, even if the actual wedding was to be held ten years into the future. The only saving grace to the ceremony, was the presence of the Yukimura twins, who, as young as they were, trying their very best to stay awake. Kaoru was using the Shotsuuren to support himself to avoid falling over if he really dozed off, while Chizuru endeavored every second to keep her back straight and her head upright.

"It must be hard on the children to sit at one place for too long," Amagiri noted, taking pity on the twins, who seemed so small in the circle of adults around them. They did not even know what awaited them after the ceremony had been completed, what more of their fates ten years into the future?

Not saying a word, Kazama focused some amount of energy into his hands, allowing what seemed like clouds to form in his palms. His eyes glowed amber, as all Oni would when they were using their in-born powers, and when they returned to their normal ruby color, two butterflies appeared, one blue, and the other, pink. The blue one flew towards Kaoru, and the pink one circled Chizuru, making the children giggle, and forget the tedium of the ceremony.

Such an act revealed two things about Kazama Chikage, although no one endeavored to interrupt him and the twins. The first was the very fact that he was able to conjure illusions that were so interactive and corporal at such a young age, which implied that he would only grow even more powerful in the years to come. Such was the nature of a son of pure-blooded Oni lineage. The other, told much more about his character. To the outside world, young Kazama was an arrogant, severe individual who cared little about others. The very fact that he was keen enough to notice that the twins were bored and tired, and to seek a way to entertain them, was enough to cement the fact that he would be more than an adequate son-in-law to the Yukimura clan.

"I'm beginning to think that you're right, my love," Yukimura whispered into his wife's ear after the butterflies that Kazama had conjured disappeared. "Chikage is going to be a very fine husband for Chizuru."

Natsuko tried hard to stifle a giggle. "You would have to make sure that your daughter falls for him for sure then," she warned her husband. Oni marriages were unions of love, and unions that were formed on equal bonds. If in the future, either Chizuru or Kazama have given their hearts to other individuals, their betrothal would naturally be voided upon the consent of both parties. However, that was not to say that all Oni betrothals did not work out the way they were planned. The Oni believed that if two people had enough serendipity to live joined fates, they would find a way to one another, no matter the circumstances between them.

* * *

><p>When the third hour passed, the ceremony had finally ended. The betrothal was a success, where both the Yukimura and Kazama clans were able to reach an agreement of equal terms on the conditions of the union. All that was to be done hence, would be to wait for Chizuru to come of age, and to make sure that both Chizuru and Kazama really chose one another as lifelong mates in the future. Both clans bowed to one another, and a large outdoor feast was prepared in the courtyard of the manor. Kazama and Chizuru were made to walk out of the main hall hand in hand, and he could not help but notice how small her hand was in his. When they were out in the sunshine, Chizuru beckoned towards Kazama. "Chikage Onii-samaâ€| could you please make another butterfly for me?" she asked him. It was such a simple request, and he knew that he would be unable to say no to such a request, much less from his future wife.<p>

"Just this once, little one," he answered, and conjured the same pink butterfly he had sent after her. Squealing in joy, she chased the butterfly, and was soon joined by Kaoru, who once again had the blue butterfly Kazama conjured for him once he had gotten into the courtyard with his parents.

"I had never expect you to be this good with children, Chikage," Yukimura observed with a highly teasing tone, nudging Kazama with his elbow. "My daughter would have you eating out of her hands, mark my words."

Kazama harrumphed at Yukimura's jest. "We shall have to see," he said. "Perhaps it would be the other way around?"

"Alright, since you're up for a challenge, if you even try to entertain my children again before sundown, you'll willingly part with five ryou to fund your future father-in-law's retirement fund," Yukimura suggested, knowing that it was impossible for Kazama to back down from a challenge.

"I'm not agreeing to such a childish venture," Kazama scowled.

"I don't think you have a choice in this, Kazama," Amagiri added, noting that both Chizuru and Kaoru had returned from their frolicking around the courtyard. "Here come the children."

"You will pay for this, Yukimura!" Kazama warned, almost baring his teeth. It was an evident Kazama clan trait that a son or daughter of the clan would take every opportunity to make humor at the expense of others, but they were could rarely take humor made in the expense of theirs as well. Yukimura was clearly exploiting that well-known trait to his full advantage, which made Kazama doubly uneasy and annoyed.

"Now, now, Chikage, you were the one who agreed to this arrangement in the first place," Yukimura replied, trying hard not to laugh. He was having too much fun, knowing that Kazama would be wholly unable to resist his daughter's adorable antics. "You could have suggested a lower bride-price, after all."

Kazama did not say anything following what Yukimura had said. It was evident that there was much more to his betrothal to lovely little Chizuru than Yukimura was seeking, more than a martial and trade alliance that he was not telling him, hiding his true intentions between comical jests and bets. He would know the true nature of his intentions after the feast if need be.

* * *

><p>HAN: Ah, so Kazama is unable to resist Chizuru from the moment they meet! MUAHAHAHAH! Of course, we all know that he's a real softie inside, so just let it slip, ok? As for the values of the wedding-gifts and the bride-price, I have no clue if they're actually worth that number in the year 1854, which corresponds to the 7th Year of Kaei, which was the same year the Yukimura clan was destroyed. However, according to Wikipedia (I know that it's a poor source of reference for you more... scholarly readers, but I just took the values it provided to get a rough estimate of the currency figures used just for the sake of the plot), one ryou is about... JPY 120000 in today's values, translating to about USD 1164.70. For the sake of it, Chizuru's bride-price is equivalent to USD 5,823,500, which is not shocking at all, because the value of one thousand year-old ginseng in today's markets is about USD 250000. Don't forget, her father is providing about 5 of them, one each for each Kazama elder, not accounting for the rest of the wedding-gifts. Also, another disclaimer: I have not mentioned that the customs above were Japanese customs in any way. They only apply to the Oni in the context of this fanfic, so do not come up to me and tell me that I've been culturally inaccurate.

Onikushita: She is only five, after all! Very, very adorable too, if the flashbacks from the anime and Hakuouki: Kyoto Ranbu are to be believed. I'm sure that Kazama agrees with me. ^_^

Tennu: Hello dear neighbor across the Causeway! I hope you liked their meeting in this chapter!

wishica: Hello there! Apa khabar/آه! أه!آ•-آه!Yheh heh heh. It does make one happy, no? It's like finding family in a vast sea of people! I'm based in Subang Jaya, Selangor, how about you? (Dear international readers, do pardon my Malaysian English in my reply to this review henceforth) Aiyo, thank you for liking ya, or more importantly, thank you for finishing the Quest in two days weh! Really appreciate it. ^_^ To be honest, I really love Hijikata, but as time passed, my liking for Harada, Saito and Souji increased, but now, Kazama comes a close second to Hijikata. heh heh heh.

Guest: I'll try to make daily updates, but it'll be kinda hard because Uni has already started for me. Darned plot bunnies dancing around my head. GRRR.

CapitalEnvy: Oh, thank you! I'll try to up the cute factor as much as I can!

5. The Foreshadowing

When the feast had ended, and the guests had returned to their quarters to rest and get away from the heat of summer, Kazama found perfect time to corner Yukimura and ask him about things that he would not usually reveal in the company of others.

If Yukimura was definitely sure that Kazama had valued the safety and wellness of those he was responsible for more than anything, then Kazama was more than willing to stake his life that Yukimura would always value the stability of his domain before making any drastic moves. He thought he could hide beneath that big, hearty laughter of his, but before long, those who knew him best would suspect his actions. He would have to be very, very desperate, if he would even agree to promise the future of his daughter to Kazama in the first place. Kazama began to think that Yukimura's move to betroth his daughter to him was more than a long-term plan, it was one that would begin with immediate effect, depending on the circumstances.

"I'm not cornering you and asking you what is going on because I doubt you, Yukimura," Kazama told his future father-in-law sternly, ruby eyes staring at the honey-colored eyes of the Oni-leader that was also his friend and mentor. "I want to help you, as best as I can."

Yukimura sighed. "The humans of the Tohoku region are getting uneasy," he answered, finally relenting, knowing that Kazama would not easily back down from anything once he had made his mind to pursue it. "They have asked for protection should war strike" and I have reason not to believe them for once." Yukimura was a pacifist, but he was not a fool. He advocated peace, because it was what he had believed in, but he was not so innocent to believe that the humans were truly their allies.

"War will strike, but not from Tohoku," Kazama told Yukimura. If there would be any uprising, it would start first from the lands that the Bakufu have little control of, from the lands in Kyushu. "Each day, there are more and more foreign ships, trading Western arms and

other goods. There will be chaos in Japan before we know it."

"What are you going to do then?" Yukimura asked him. The illusionary defenses of the Kazama clan were famous throughout the Oni clans, and he knew that Kazama would most likely hide his family in the safest location he can think of. "Where would you hide your family?"

"Sakurajima," Kazama answered. "The rulers of Satsuma have granted my family the volcanic island of Sakurajima. I have already raised defenses there, but moving my village there piece by piece would take a large amount of time." A village as large as the Kazama village had more than just families and houses to uproot. They had to plan for the various plantations they ventured in, so as to remain self-sufficient to avoid human contact.

"But surely, the humans would not allow you to get away with this without giving anything in return," Yukimura reasoned. The humans were a wily bunch, and he knew enough about them to realize that they never traded in equal measure. "What do they want from you in return?"

Kazama chuckled, a sound that carried his usual, pompous tone, but one that hid some measure of bitterness. "My service, in return," he said. "The Shimazu clan, the rulers of the humans in Satsuma, would want my participation in any of their ventures."

Yukimura sighed. "And you called me a fool, Chikage," he said, running a hand through his head of short, olive hair. "What difference is bowing to the humans in their service, than being their slaves?" he asked Kazama. "But then again—| what choice do we have?"

"Then let me furnish your village with warriors, especially in the coming weeks, if you don't want to shed a drop of blood," Kazama demanded Yukimura. The Oni race were not like the humans. They took care of each other's backs, and they meant every single word they uttered. Oni do not go behind their promises.

"Who would protect your village if you do so?" Yukimura asked him. No matter how great the warriors of the Kazama clan were, they could not outnumber any human force that dared to rise against them. Their wounds could heal immediately, but they were not truly invincible. They would all die if they were either pierced through the heart or beheaded—| and with the influx of Western weapons, as Kazama had noticed, then the humans could do it with ten times the ease. Yet, no matter how enticing the offer, Yukimura understood that he could not burden the Kazama clan by asking their presence in the protection of his, so far away from their home. It would be utterly selfish of him, and it was a move that he could not find from within him to condone.

Kazama did not answer. There was truth in what Yukimura had said, and he knew that he could not argue further on that front. "The Council would not stand and watch you and yours be threatened by humans," he stressed.

"But I'm afraid that this threat does not only lie on my family, Chikage," Yukimura said forebodingly. "It lies on all the clans." It was no secret that no matter how much the Oni tried to hide from the

humans, they would still sitting ducks. Pockets of life, thriving communities, even in the harshest of Japan's environments could be easily discovered by the humans, even if they were hidden or trapped. The Oni could not be wholly independent of them as well, because they needed them to trade their wares with. Not all the clans had lands wide enough, or even as fertile as that of the Kazama and the Yukimura.

At that time, it seemed that all of humankind conspired against the Oni, that they were going to be engulfed in a sea of genocide, but Kazama knew that it was not the case. Although the Oni Council had decreed that there was to be no contact between humans and Oni sometime before the end of the Sengoku Era, none of the clans seemed to have ever abided by the rule, mostly because of the will of fate. The Shimazu clan demanded the loyalty of his clan and that of the Amagiri in exchange for living out their lives peacefully in the Satsuma-han, while Yukimura was only asked for protection. The Yase clan was already foresworn to guard the Imperial family throughout the centuries, and the Shiranui to the rulers of the Oni in the Choushu-han. If the Oni were willing to let go of their pride, and enter the world of humans for whatever they wanted, then perhaps, they would be able to weather the storm.

"Wait, your family fought for Tokugawa Ieyasu in the Battle of Sekigahara," Kazama said. "But who were the ones who approached you for protection?" Things were not quite right. The Oni clans of Kyushu, which meant the clans governed by him, were the backers of the enemies of the Tokugawa Bakufu, those who resisted Tokugawa Ieyasu's clearly successful attempt in uniting Japan under one rule.

"They are rebels," Yukimura answered. "However, they are too little in number to be considered a great force, unlike those in Choushu, or Satsuma, for that matter. The Bakufu has no fear of them." The hold of the Bakufu was strongest in the territories nearest to Edo, and the lands of the Yukimura were engulfed within the Bakufu's circle of influence. If Yukimura's theory was right, then he would be going against his clan's old allegiances, and thus, going against the boundaries of their people.

Cornered by a new threat, and forced to oblige an old alliance, at last Kazama understood why Yukimura had so eagerly promised Chizuru to him. "Do you have so much confidence in me that you would put your daughter into my care?" he asked Yukimura. "What about your son?"

"If it comes to that, I will house my children with the Yase clan first," Yukimura replied, for Natsuko's family was the closest ally to the Yase clan, and no mortal would ever dare to touch them without a single fear for retribution. They would be safer with Senya and her daughter if anything untoward happened to him and his.

Somehow, the exchange brought some amount of relief to him, knowing that Yukimura would not be so foolish as to risk the lives of his heirs as well. It was not because he was worried for his future bride, or the fates of his close friend's family, his thoughts came from the survival of his race, his species. Any given Oni clan leader was not only responsible for their families, and the Council, but were also representatives of their regions as well. His concern for Yukimura Chizo and the rebels that extorted protection from his

family, were all well-founded.

Yuikumura knew this fact well. "If only you would shed the air of an arrogant bastard, Chikage, you would actually be a decent fellow," he told his younger counterpart with a chuckle. "But then again, it is what makes you well, you."

"Can you not talk to me as if you are walking towards death, Yukimura?" Kazama asked Yukimura, sensing that there was still more to what Yukimura was revealing to him. A cold chill passed up his spine, as if Yukimura had already expected that something would happen.

Yukimura only smiled, and told Kazama. "Baka, I was the one who taught you how to be a clan leader, never forget that! Don't worry, I'll know what to do when the time comes."

With those words, Yukimura sent Kazama on his way. He spent the rest of the day conferring with his advisors, his uncles and cousins that helped him to run his village. He would not see any of his guests until it was time to bid them farewell the following morning.

* * *

><p>The following summer, the Kazama village was preparing for a grand visit from the Yukimura clan. Just that spring, Yukimura had written to Hana, telling her that Chizuru had wished to see the butterflies that Kazama had conjured for them. But at the same time, they had received news most terrible from Edo Bay.<p>

"Black ships from America have landed at Edo," Amagiri reported to Kazama, who had been preparing to receive their guests in the courtyard, speaking of a faraway nation, many, many miles west from Japan, and yet, only a lesser amount of that distance due east. It was said that it was soon to be even greater than England, France and Holland combined, and with the might of its naval forces, perhaps there was some truth to the claim. "They have managed to threaten the Shogun into opening Japan's doors to trade."

"What did the Shogun promise?" Kazama asked Amagiri, holding his breath, because at the end of the day, whatever demands the Shogun had seceded to, would affect the Oni as a whole in the long run.

Amagiri sighed. "The Bakufu would open Nagasaki, Shimoda and Hakodate to American ships seeking provisions," he answered.

"When more countries come, the Bakufu would grant them the same they gave America," Kazama predicted. It would be the same as the Bakufu opening all avenues of international trade to all nations. "Progress would come, perhaps, at a great and frightening price!" Although what he was governing as on the smallest of scale in the grand design of things, he realized that

He was interrupted by the sound of frantic footsteps coming into the courtyard from the main hall. Within mere minutes, he saw a scout, paled from exhaustion, crusted in dirt and grime. "I come from Yase," the scout panted. "The Yukimura clan has been destroyed!"

Kazama's eye widened at the news, but he did not know if it was in fear, in shock, or a combination of both. "What?" he exclaimed. He had sent three of his best illusionists there so that they could help Yukimura Chizo in defending his village. "How is that possible?"

"The rebel humans in the Tohoku region wanted to bring their plans into action, and they wanted Yukimura Chizo to aid them," the scout reported after a large drink of water. The journey from Yase to Kagoshima was long and hard, and the scout seemed like he was near death. "They were refused, and the humans burnt the entire village down!"

The scout said that for days, there was smoke all over the forests, and when the smog reached Yase, it was too late. The village had already been razed and burnt, and no one could identify the bodies of the dead. It was as if the Yukimura clan had never existed before. Centuries of providing the best medical care to those around them, centuries of guarding the Tohoku region. All gone.

"Are there any survivors?" Kazama asked the scout.

"None, save one," the scout answered. "His name is Koudou, he will settle in Edo as a practicing Western healer."

None save one. At once, Kazama's thoughts went to little Chizuru and Kaoru. They would no longer run free in their family's meadows again, sacrifices of their people to the wrath and cruelty of humans.

* * *

><p>HAN: I know... the Yukimura clan just went away like a cloud of smoke. My justification for this would be that if Kazama had fought by Yukimura's side, Chizuru would have remembered it. As we could see from the anime and the movie, we can only see that she remembers running away from a great fire with Kaoru, and eventually ending up all alone. In his route, Kazama brought Chizuru back to her village in seeking the Shinsen-Gumi as they moved ever northwards since the Battle of Toba-Fushimi, and he asked her if she felt any hatred towards the humans who destroyed her family, and she replied that she felt only sadness. So it can be seen that Kazama himself was not there when the calamity happened. I also looked for Mandarin translations Hakuouki Zuisouroku, and realized that the Yukimura home was actually somewhere near Aizu, which is now in the Fukushima Prefecture.<p>

wishica: OH HEY! I'm studying in Monash Sunway as well! We should TOTALLY meet up! I tried to PM you but you had the feature disabled, so meh~ Saito is adorable. I loved his route in Zuisouroku and Yuugiroku 1 and 2 the most. Actually... Harada's route is the most... spicy if you know what I mean. HEH HEH HEH. Aiya, my English so-so nia, nothing much to shout about.

OniKuShita: As I've said before, Kazama is just like Hijikata. He is a softie inside with a gooey center. You just need to learn how to prove such qualities exist by plucking the right heartstrings. The Yukimura clan are known as pacifists, practically from the chapter in Zuisouroku that I've shared with you guys just the Mandarin translations are to be trusted, none of the Yukimura clan defended

themselves against the attacking humans, and Kazama guessed if it was either true pacifism or Oni pride that they would rather die than aid the rebels.

6. The Submission

The years that followed the arrival of the Black Ships, headed by the American Commodore Matthew C. Perry was chaos for Japan. The financial system went into utter disarray, owing to the fact that foreign traders were quickly trading their silver in exchange for cheaper Japanese gold. During that time, five units of silver was traded for one unit of gold, whilst it was fifteen units of silver to one unit of gold anywhere else. Such shocks quickly devalued the Japanese currency, and inflation began skyrocketing into levels unseen before.

Treaties of unfair trade between the Western nations and Japan quickly sprouted left, right and center, and Japan was seen to be on the losing end of international trade. The Ansei Treaties not only gave foreigners freedom to trade, and even take residence in the ports of Nagasaki, Kobe, Yokohama, Niigata and Edo, they also gave the foreigners low import and export duties that were subject to international control. All of a sudden, Japan no longer had control over the products she had traded in. The lords of Kyushu, and their retainers grew impatient, and demanded to the Emperor that such treaties be stopped, and the foreigners driven out of Japan so as to maintain stability.

However, there was one use of the foreign presence in Japan. With the exchange of trade, no matter how unfair, came the exchange of skills. In order to engage in trade with the foreign devils, the Japanese were forced to learn languages like English, to deal with the British and the Americans, Russian, French and even Dutch, and were then able to learn their skills and their thoughts. Eager to build technological marvels like they could, the Japanese started to act like sponges, absorbing and learning whatever they could.

It was a time of chaos for Japan, because those who had the fortune to trade with the foreigners rose in economic greatness, while those who could not ride the sudden wave of change, was swallowed by it. Inflation caused poverty, riddled with famine, earthquakes and plagues of cholera, brought into Japan thanks to the foreigners. Such was their suffering that one would rather live as a dog than as a human.

For the Oni, it was a time of great fear. As the humans started to become more and more violent towards one another, they knew that the humans would demand their assistance sooner or later, and with what had happened to the Yukimura clan, no one would dare to refuse them.

In those dark years, Kazama Chikage started to endeavor the great migration of his people, piece by piece. He first set up the rudimentary defenses for the new village site, using pieces of volcanic rock from the volcano on Sakurajima that had protected his clan for centuries. He and his clansmen had discovered that if one would focus their internal energies, or Ki, on a medium-sized piece of said volcanic rock, it would form a web concealment that in area of about forty houses. It would be a more efficient way of using

ofuda made from the ash of the volcano, as they had done since time immemorial.

The project would consume every waking moment that Kazama had, and he spent that time willingly, knowing that he would be closer and closer in providing a safe haven for his family. However, at the back of his head, he could not help but speculate if Yukimura Koudou, a descendant of the Yukimura branch family was truly the only survivor of the clan. No matter what, he had once promised Yukimura Chizo that he would protect his daughter. Knowing that he was unable to have done so, because he was an even larger fool to trust that fool that was Yukimura that there was no imminent dangerâ€¦ did not sit well with him. Had he failed on his promise?

He had no choice but to banish his thoughts for the moment. There were more cares that he had to tend to, things that called to his immediate attention. He was on Sakurajima, going through the plans of the new Kazama manor with Amagiri Kyuuju, and cousin Kohei, the painter and architect of the family, and decided that for posterity's sake, they would build one exactly like their current one in Kagoshima Bay. The manor had stood the chaos of the Sengoku Era, and also the falsified security and safety to the Edo era. He would have it stand for many more eras to come.

"The construction would take about five years," Kohei told Kazama. "And we'll have to go through it stage by stage, so in the very least we can inhabit the completed areas."

Kazama nodded. Five years was only a small amount of time in the span of the lifetimes of the Oni. However, they were pressed for time, and he would have liked to ensure that his people were moved into the safety and seclusion of Sakurajima as soon as possible. "Do whatever you can to make sure the timeline is followed," he told Kohei, and turned his attentions towards Amagiri. "What news of the emissary from the daimyo?"

"They wish to meet with you and my brother three days hence," Amagiri replied. Satsuma could be the only han in which there are two Oni clans upon the Council. The daimyo that ruled Satsuma did not know such a detail, but the Shimazu clan has long been allies to the Kazama clan, and now that the Amagiri clan were also granted lands in Satsuma-han, they too, were bound by allegiance to the government of the Satsuma.

In the time of Kazama Chitose at the end of the Sengoku Era, the Daimyo of Satsuma had been a surrogate father to his ancestor. In his lifetime, Kazama preferred not to have close ties with the Shimazu clan apart from the barest of formalities. He attended funerals and weddings, and the odd celebration, but nothing more. He was lucky that his family had been permanent fixtures at Satsuma, and no one had ever come to question their existence, whether or not the humans know that they were Oni. Their existence had already been taken as a given there in Kagoshima, and hence, no one would ever suspect their intentions.

"Surely they would want us to join their cause," Kazama said to Amagiri. The scholars and samurai of Kyushu had begun to rise up in dissatisfaction of the Bakufu's current politics, and certainly, they would not have dared to challenge the Bakufu had the daimyo not encouraged it. "I wonder what positions will they give us?"

Amagiri exhaled deeply. "We'll certainly not be vanguards," he answered, noting Kazama's well-known, biting sarcasm that would ring with some amount of truth.

* * *

><p>On the third day, both Kazama Chikage and Amagiri Kazutarou were welcomed at Kagoshima Castle at high noon. With the summer beating down on them, Kazama and Amagiri Kazutarou entered the dwelling of the Daimyo Shimazu Tadayoshi, who was only a young man, around twenty three years in age. However, influence and power remained in the hands of his father, Hisamitsu, who was named his regent. Hisamitsu was a man of great ambition, knowing that Japan could not survive without unity amongst its rulers. The Oni clans had heard rumors that Shimazu senior was part of a political faction that wished for mediation between the Shogun and the Emperor, but would not act on them until they had solid proof.<p>

It must be noted that although the Satsuma-han was one of the most powerful domains in Japan, and their rulers, the Shimazu among the leading daimyo in terms of influence, Kagoshima Castle was bare, Spartan and too-small for its masters. Its defenses were bare, and its ramparts low, and was certainly not able to withstand an invasion of any sort. This was done to throw off the eyes of the Bakufu, to make all eyes trained upon Satsuma think that they were incapable of defending themselves, and hence, were a minor threat.

The defenses of Kagoshima Castle lied not in the thickness of its walls, or the heights of its towers. But in its people, and its weapons. The Shimazu clan had highly loyal fighters, and every one of its retainers would support and carry out the wills of their liege-lords to their deaths. As an added plus, they had the support of two prominent Oni clansâ€| or they would have them no matter what, due to hereditary allegiances that have to be carried out, due to Oni pride and traditionâ€|

Thus, Kazama and Amagiri Kazutarou found themselves before the young Shimazu Tadayoshi, dressed in court-apparel in the colors of their clans, in the courtyard of Kagoshima Castle. "There were many tales of your people, and yet, had you not come to my uncle's funeral, I would not have known your existence," he said to the two Oni before him. "Is it true that you drink the blood of humans and eat their flesh?"

"Those were tales that our ancestors spread to your kind so that you would leave us alone, gozen-sama," Amagiri Kazutarou explained. "In reality, we eat and drink as all humans do."

Shimazu Tadayoshi nodded, and chuckled after pondering Amagiri Kazutarou's words. "Ah, indeed, that is a clever tactic," he replied. "I could not have thought of a better defense mechanismâ€|" Kazama remained in silence, but continued to observe the man who now held the fates of the Western Oni in his hands. If he was an unfair man, Kazama knew that there would be a possibility in which he would have to start defending his people against such a lord, which was a large probability by his books. But if the Daimyo of the Satsuma-han would impress him, he would have to willingly submit and serve.

However, there was another Shimazu that they had to meet, and was the

power behind the current Daimyo: Shimazu Hisamitsu. There was no doubt that this man was a brilliant administrator, to have united the various members of the Satsuma-han to call for a revolt against the Bakufu. "Let us be direct, Kazama, Amagiri, we need your aid in our efforts."

"And what efforts would they be?" Kazama asked Shimazu Hisamitsu, turning to look at the Daimyo's father in the eye. Ruby met dark brown, and he knew that the human was trying hard to keep his composure when faced with such a challenge. It was not because he dared not to utter words that implied rebellion and revolution, but because how Kazama himself had appeared. There was something about his ruby eyes that made him look sinister, and the very fact that his pupils were not wholly round, but had some sort of edge. Having those eyes gazing at oneself, as if he were prey to be consumed, would be a harrowing experience to anyone. "Do you plan to secede to the Sonno-joi movement propagated by Choshu, or do you plan to aid the Bakufu in quelling the rebels?"

With the nation split in two, Kazama knew that there was a possibility that the rulers of the Satsuma-han, one of the most powerful domains in Japan, would play both sides. Due to the fact that Satsuma had always been too far to be controlled by Bakufu, and the Daimyo of Satsuma were allowed to make the supposed pilgrimage to Edo every two years, where they would have to remain there for most parts of a year. This enabled the Shimazu clan to gain their vast wealth, bolstered by illegal trade with foreigners, and that vast wealth has enabled them to purchase foreign weapons, cannons, guns, and mortars, which, riddled with the great loyalty of their vassals, contributed to the frightening strength of their clan and their lands.

"What do you suggest?" Shimazu Hisamitsu asked Kazama in return. "I would need the advice of the Oni leaders of these lands as well, in order to help my son reach a viable conclusion."

"Do what you do best, then," Kazama suggested, after looking towards Amagiri Kazutarou for askance to speak his mind. Humans were the absolute experts in betraying your own kind, and although the Shimazu line of Daimyo had been benevolent to their people, and their plentiful land, they were among the most two-faced family that Kazama had ever known. With their right hand, they submit to the Bakufu, and with their left, they would hold the knife that would be twisted into the backs of their masters. "You never truly saw the Tokugawa Bakufu as true masters of the Satsuma-han. You seek to rule yourself."

Shimazu Hisamitsu broke into a crooked, wily smile. "You Oni claim that you do not care about the temporal affairs of humans, yet you know our politics like the back of your hand," he said to Kazama. "Amagiri, what is your view on this?"

"My family and I shall serve just to repay the land-debt we owe to you," Amagiri Kazutarou answered. "We shall follow every directive given to us. You need only direct us." It could not be said that the leaders of the Amagiri clan were blind followers of their liege-lords, humans or Oni, but they did not see a point in involving themselves into the meddlesome details of contexts, histories and implications. They would see the job done, and done well, and that was enough for them.

Kazama, on the other hand, was a different beast altogether. His concerns were the safety of his family and his people. Every step he took, was for the welfare of the Western Oni, his choices geared towards that end at all times. He would have the Oni removed from the world of humans, even if he had to personally bind them in ropes and drag them towards appropriate homes for them. That resolve had only increased with the extinction of the Yukimura clan. He could not take such a risk, and nor would the Oni Council survive such a shock.

"How many fighters do you need?" Amagiri Kazutarou asked Shimazu Hisamitsu, not wanting to waste any more time. War was beckoning at their very home, and it made sense for the Satsuma-han to bring the Oni into their military arms, for they were invincible, unless stabbed through their hearts or if they were decapitated. The Kazama and Amagiri clans were not short of fighters, and he was sure that Kazama would be willing to part with a few warriors from his lands.

"One from each clan," Shimazu Hisamitsu replied. "We require the greatest warriors from your ranks, and only one is needed. Your duties would be to protect our agents as they move about in Kyoto in the coming months."

"Then there'll be no need to tarry," Kazama said. "I am the best warrior in my clan," he said, immediately volunteering himself. "At the age of ten I killed my own uncle to avenge the death of my father." Shimazu Hisamitsu raised an eyebrow, but did not question him at all. No one ever doubted that Kazama had seized the leadership of his clan at a very young age, but no one else could prove that since Kazama's forceful ascension, there had not been any more sons or daughters of the clan that could exceed his talents.

Amagiri Kazutarou knew the game that Kazama was playing. He volunteered himself so the other warriors of the clan could stay and protect their home. He would rather those of greater caliber than he was take up arms in the Kazama village if need be. It was a selfless act, no doubt, but he would not do the same as he did. Unlike Kazama, he did not have a wise and able grandmother that acted as a matriarch of the clan. His wife was young, and his children merely infants. He was more needed at home than he was abroad. After all, the duties of all Oni clan-leaders were to their families. Also, if he had remained in Satsuma, Kazama would have another able lieutenant and ally in their home-base, which would not be a detriment to the defenses of their people.

"I will vouch for Kazama Chikage's abilities," Amagiri Kazutarou said, breaking the silence. "There is no warrior of greater prowess than the leader of the Western Oni-clans." Shimazu Hisamitsu gave them both an encouraging nod. Kazama Chikage would be the representative of the Kazama clan in the ranks of the Satsuma-han henceforth. "Meanwhile, I will send my younger brother, Kyuuju in your service. He is a calm and patient individual, and has been a close companion of Kazama through many dangers and conflicts."

"Very well," Shimazu Hisamitsu said. "I shall have Kazama Chikage and Amagiri Kyuuju in my service then. I plead you to aid my agents well. When the dark age of the coming conflict ends, so will the debts of your people to my family."

Both Kazama and Amagiri Kazutarou bowed at Shimazu Hisamitsu's conclusion. Henceforth, both Oni clans would once again be vassals to the rulers of the Satsuma-han since the ending months of the Sengoku Era. Whether the Satsuma-han emerged the victors, or the losers in the future, their debts would be cleared. They would only need to be humbled before the humans for a few more years, a drop of water in an endless ocean of time, and then, their people would truly be free.

* * *

><p>HAN: Hello there everyone! I hope you are still here with me... the fic has been rather quiet these few days. _ In this chapter, I address Kazama and Amagiri's entrance into the service of the Satsuma-han. Originally I wanted to showcase Saigo Takamori (who was featured in Hakuouki: Bakumatsu Musouroku and also in The Quest) as the one who would induct the Oni into the politics of the Satsuma-han during the early days of the Bakumatsu, but I realized that a little upstart (at the time) like Saigo would certainly be unable to move someone like Kazama. Our favorite Oni leader needs the push from certain higher-ups, heh heh.<p>

Wishica: Hello again! I hope you are doing well! It's a shame I couldn't catch you in Uni though.

7. The Arrival

Although he was often critical of humans, Kazama Chikage could not ever deny that the humans were brilliant engineers and artisans. Ever since his arrival in Kyoto, he had never ceased to appreciate the beauty of the city, the capital of their crumbling nation that has lasted for a thousand years at least, and he realized that thereâ€| could be some use for humans after all.

Smoking on his pipe (he had forgotten how he had picked up that habit), he rested on the windowsill of his lodgings with one knee curled to his body and looked out to the scenery that greeted him, sprawling streets filled with majestic houses, temples, gardens and lakes, watched over by the Imperial Palace. When the night came, the city would be crowned with stars, but on the ground, its roads would be illuminated by countless lanternsâ€|

The view of the night, however, was marred the sight of men patrolling in uniforms of light-green haori. They came from the Mibu district of the city, a gang of rowdy peasants that were playing the game of being samurai, thinking that they could change the world by just killing whoever the Bakufu asked them to kill. They had just been placed under the direction of the leaders of the Aizu-han, and called themselves the Kyoto Roshi-gumi, but were more like wolves attacking in a pack. There was no wonder that they had attained the nickname of "Miburou" (â€-ç"Ÿç<¼), or rather, the "Wolves of Mibu."

Yet, even as the Roshi-gumi were the rising stars of the Bakufu, he had heard of another rumor. A rumor that perked his ears the moment he heard them. "There is word among the streets that the Roshi-gumi had acquired the services of a doctor practicing Western medicine," Amagiri told Kazama just that afternoon. "A man named 'Yukimura Koudou'."

"The sole survivor of the Yukimura clan," Kazama replied, recalling that ten years ago, the scout from Yase had reported that a son of the branch family had escaped the fire that razed his clan's village, one initiated by the rebels of the Tohoku region. "What is he doing there with those peasants?"

"Some form of research," Amagiri said, for once, without his usual confidence. For all his network of spies could do, he could not still ascertain the nature of the Roshi-gumi, and those they had associated with. It seemed that they were more than what the general populace of Kyoto had deemed them to be, a gang of killers with cold heartsâ€| They seemed to be hiding a secret that no one else had yet discovered, and somehow, there was a cold chill that filled his spine whenever Kazama had thought of itâ€| "Do you plan to investigate it?"

"We might as well," Kazama said lazily. The din of the Roshi-Gumi's heavy footsteps had gone, and he once again looked out the window. "We shall coax the secrets this city holds, and see what it bodes for us."

* * *

><p>The first point of investigation would of course, be the one place where men gathered in large numbers, where alcohol flowed freely, and where women were abundant. In Kyoto, such a place would mean the Sumiya. It was where one could find Kyoto's many officials in the same place, drinking, eating, and making-merry, no matter their faction, or political ideology, surrounded by geiko and oiran, depending on the tastes of the men who held great parties there. It would be the perfect place to start.<p>

When the sun had set, and the lanterns were raised, Kazama and Amagiri set out to Shimabara, the well-known pleasure quarter of Kyoto. Passing to the great gate that marked the entrance into the district, they soon entered a different world, a world of perfume, music, sake and laughter. The rule was that no weapons were allowed in Shimabara, but there were many who turned a blind eye to this, due to the chaos of the age. Every sensible man would want to defend himself, in times where he might be cut down the moment his guard was dropped, and no one, could afford to do so in those times, even if they were in the company of beautiful women, food and drink.

The Sumiya was the largest establishment in Shimabara. Its facade the longest and widest of all the shops and restaurants in the surrounding neighborhood. Women of the tea-houses or the pleasure houses came in and out with their chaperones and servants while men entered in droves. It was the best place to find and receive information, if one knew where to look.

"I will take the upper floors," Amagiri said, and moved with a few men who were headed up the stairs. Humans were such dull creatures that they could not notice that there was a tall, stocky man with red hair and blue eyes walking among them, but it had always been an Oni trait to walk around in the company of others unseen, being otherwise hidden in plain sight.

Amagiri's absence meant that Kazama was supposed to tackle the lower floors, which proved to be the greater mine of information that he

had first expected. There were drunken men, or men who were set on getting drunk, left, right and center, and these were men whose tongues could be loosened easily with the availability of alcohol. He just needed to be sure which sort of information suited him and which did not.

He went from corridor to corridor, using his superior Oni senses to sieve through the words being uttered, but found nothing of particular interest. Most was talk of grandeur and bravery, but he doubted that any of the men present could carry their boasts into reality. Rolling his eyes in the foolery of men, he took a left turn and before his eyes appeared a most peculiar company.

There was a boy, around his teens, perhaps, with striking hair of navy and eyes the color of the setting sun. He was trying to sooth a much older man, who was tall, with tufts of white hair in a sea of blackened grey, tied into a mage. The old man had become loud and violent in drunken stupor, even forgetting who he was for a moment. The boy tried to bring the man back to his senses, but was interrupted by the appearance of three other men who sought to challenge the man into a duel.

Kazama could easily tell that this man was no pushover. He was a strong, powerful swordsman with the authority of a dictator. However, not all men were blessed with a perfect life. For all the ability and power that this man had, there was a weakness that was hidden from the façade of his existence, one that no human could easily see with their naked, and blurred eyes. "Leave it," he told the challengers. "You are hardly a match for a man like him."

All eyes were upon him when after he said those words, and he revealed himself, stepping away from the shadows and into the light. All looked upon him with suspicion and unease, which was an effect of his presence that he strove for. A steward directed the would-be combatants to the path that they were supposed to be heading to, and gave him a small nod in thanks for preventing a fight that would certainly lead up to costly damages.

The drunken man merely shrugged and began to leave with his servants. As he passed Kazama without so much as appreciating his presence, Kazama asked, "You are suffering from a debilitating disease, are you not? Your body should have been rendered useless at this point, it is a miracle that you can even stand now."

The man smiled crookedly in reply. "I am impressed that you can tell that even if we've only met," he said to Kazama, turning slightly to try to have a look at the stranger who so accurately assessed the predicament that he was in.

"I have met a man who had your condition," Kazama replied. It had occurred to an old grandfather that bought the vegetables from the plantations of his family at cost price to sell at the market. He had lived a long life providing for his large family, but the Gods decided to be cruel and curse him with such a disease, leaving him immobile, riddled with dementia. "Day by day, he slowly forgot who he was, nor could he recognize those he once knew. After suffering for too long, he passed on. You shall share his fate shortly."

The man harrumphed. "What of it?" he asked Kazama. "I am well aware that I will die, writhing in agony." There was such great resolve in

his voice, as if he was trying to convince Kazama that he would not have wanted it in any other way.

Kazama watched him leave, and he mused to himself, "What an interesting human," he said, words clearly meant for that dying stranger. Perhaps the man already knew that he was no ordinary man as well. Thus, he started to continue his search for information anew, disbelieving that he would return to his lodgings empty-handed that night.

"What have you found?" Amagiri asked him when they were in the safety of the safe-house of the Satsuma-han.

"That there are strange sounds of wailing, dying men in several houses near Mibu, which get louder closer to the house where the Roshi-Gumi call home," Kazama answered. "Half of Mibu village is spooked, and they dare not find out the cause of such disturbances. They seem to be crying out of thirst and hunger for blood." In the past, his people had told humans that the Oni drank the blood of humans and ate their flesh so that they would leave their people alone, but to actually hear of humans with a literal thirst for blood, was ultimately interesting indeed.

Amagiri crossed his arms. "Meanwhile, I have received hearsay that Yukimura Koudou is indeed working with the Roshi-Gumi, but he does not treat their sick and wounded," he added. A doctor practicing Western medicine was priceless these days, and yet if they did not utilize his services, why did they hire him in the first place?

"Perhaps we should pay a visit to Mibu soon," Kazama suggested. "Let us see what the last son of the Yukimura has planned up his sleeve."

* * *

><p>In the morning, when the sun had just barely risen, the two Oni moved towards Mibu village, with the permissions of the leaders of the Satsuma-han's presence in Kyoto, of course. They did not need to see an image of Yukimura Koudou, they would know him just by the presence he had, the Ki he held. They knew that they were not pursuing an Oni of great power, because Koudou did not have a great deal of Oni blood in his veins. Whatever he had as an Oni, was only an illustrious surname and the excellent training given to him as a scion of the great healer-clan.<p>

Once in Mibu, Amagiri spotted a man with a shaven head, walking around the village in the most suspicious manner. Every few steps he took, he would look back to check if he was followed. A strange behavior to be having if one was not harboring secrets of any kind. They followed him to an almost-empty street, where they could see that he was headed to a certain house with no signage as to whom it had belonged to.

At that point of time, Kazama had been ready to pounce at his target. He wanted to know what Yukimura Koudou was doing, and he would have his information immediately. However, as he was ready to close in on Koudou, he felt a hand on his shoulder. The reaction was so natural, so immediate, that he drew his katana as he turned to face the person who dared to interrupt him.

It was a tall man, graced with greyish-lavender hair and eyes the color of mulberries. "Shiranui Kyo," Kazama greeted with a scowl, knowing that Yukimura Koudou would have already disappeared into one of the many houses in Mibu Village. Shiranui was the nephew of the current head of the Shiranui clan, an Oni clan that was based in Hagi, which was the capital city of the Choushu-han. If even he was there, it meant that the Choushu-han also required the assistance of the Oni. In their own politics, the Shiranui clan was not a vassal-family to the Kazama clan like the Amagiri, but for the fact that the head of the Kazama clan was also the leader of the Oni in the Western territories of Japan, some amount of respect was expected from Shiranui.

"Yo, Kazama, Amagiri," Shiranui greeted casually. Of course, not having the mark of a potential Oni-leader gave him certain freedoms, especially in conduct. Only those who were destined to lead were tied to the strictness of Oni traditions and culture. "Fancy meeting you here, even if it's a breeding ground for certain breeds of hounds."

"Hmph, I would guess that you have come here because of the humans," Kazama replied. "What has your family done to the Mori clan that they demand your presence here?"

"Well that's a little bit mean," Shiranui replied. "Aren't you pleased to see me here?"

"Get on with it, Shiranui," Amagiri continued. "Do not go around in circles." Shiranui, Amagiri and Kazama were the closest in age among the children of those in the Oni Council. While Amagiri and Kazama grew up in close proximity to one another, Shiranui Kyo would often come to the Kazama village for visits just because his uncle thought that it was best that his nephew spent some time with boys his age.

"Yare, yare, what am impatient bunch," Shiranui muttered under his breath. "Alright, alright, I'll tell you. I'm here to help a friend out, not out of some land-debt like the two of you." It was an interesting twist, of course, but Kazama had heard tell that the Shiranui clan has indeed been worshipped like gods by the humans in their own lands. Perhaps the Mori clan had only a hint of authority upon them because of this fact.

"A friend?" Amagiri inquired further. It was rare to hear of an Oni befriending a human, especially after the decimation of the Yukimura clan.

"He's an idiot, but he has a good heart. Says he wants to change this country and whatnot, but I'm just here to make sure that he doesn't kill himself," Shiranui answered plainly, with that infuriating (at least to Kazama) grin on his face still.

"This friend of yoursâ€¦ he serves the Choushu-han, does he not?" Kazama asked.

"Well, of course he does," Shiranui answered. "But that doesn't mean that I'll have to blow the two of you into pieces whenever I see you right? I'm still Shiranui Kyo, and I don't want the entire Oni Council after my blood if I do that." Arrogant bastard or no, Kazama

Chikage was not the Oni to be trifled with at all, and even Shiranui knew that, despite the current antagonism, whether apparent or not, between Choushu and Satsuma.

"Very well then," Amagiri concluded, and gave a belated greeting bow to Shiranui. "It was a pleasure meeting you,"

Shiranui nodded and waved them goodbye. "I'll be seeing you two idiots for sure!" he exclaimed, before turning his back and walking towards a different direction.

Once Shiranui was out of earshot, Kazama sighed. "That fool lost us our target," he growled. "I should have him skinned alive."

"You will risk the wrath of the Oni Council if you do that, Kazama," Amagiri cautioned. Shiranui was still the much-beloved nephew of the Shiranui clan-leader, after all. "We shall hunt for Yukimura Koudou another day."

Kazama harrumphed. "Another day, then."

* * *

><p>HAN: Ah, finally Kazama and Amagiri enter the city of Kyoto. The drunk, old man Kazama talks to is Serizawa Kamo, who was one of the commanders of the Shinsengumi before he was ordered to be assassinated by Hijikata and Kondou. The conversation between Serizawa and Kazama appears in Episode 10 of Reimeiroku's anime. It is implied that in the anime, and the movie, that Kazama has met Yukimura Koudou in Kyoto before he met Chizuru, so I decided to make them look for Koudou. I'm wondering if I should let Sen-hime appear soon or not, though. What do you think? Oh, and another point of conversation would be should I incorporate Kazama's routes in the two Hakuouki Yuugiroku games into this fic. If you want me to, then I'll be glad to oblige, since it sort-of shows how Kazama attempts to court Chizuru heh heh heh.<p>

Wishica: Heh heh, meanwhile I hope you've enjoyed this fic so far!

OniKuShita: If I remember correctly, Kazama will meet Chizuru during the Kinmon No Hen, where he stops the Shinsengumi from heading to Mt. Tennou.

aryaputra: Oh, do tell me when the second movie is online! It almost happened in Blood+ when Saya almost took Solomon's hand, but too bad damned Haji had to interfere *grinds teeth*.

8. The Allegiances

Another night at the Sumiya, another night spent with unproductivity, surrounded by drunken men, slurred words and empty boasts and challenges. But, he was not there for work that night, he was supposed to accompany a few comrades in arms for a round of drinks. Naturally, he would deign to entertain such a request, but the man who was buying the drinks was a man of enough influence to demand his civility. Saigo Takamori was more than a shrewd man, he was a man of utter daring and verocity that even the lords of the Shimazu clan had to take his words into their thoughts, and obviously did not like any

challenges to his authority as the head of the affairs of the Satsuma-han out of their domain.

"You have not been drinking much, Kazama," Saigo said to Kazama, who merely picked at the food served to him with his chopsticks, doing aught else as the rest of the men talked and drank. "Is the sake here not to your tastes?"

Although his visage was apparently blank and patient, Kazama cursed inwardly. Food and drink provided in the Sumiya were famous because of their quality, hence, their cost as well. Saigo was not flaunting his money, but the fact that Kazama was bound by his blood-debt to the Satsuma-han, and thus was expected to adhere to certain codes of behaviour around him. A proud Oni like Kazama would most certainly have little patience human foolishness, much less human audacity.

"I am unaccustomed to such richness," Kazama replied with a bow and asked for permission to be excused. Even if he was subordinate to Saigo, he still had a reputable standing in the Satsuma-han, and there were many that deferred to him. In all truth, the sake brewed in his own village far surpassed those served there in the Sumiya.

"Be sure to return quickly," Saigo cautioned, and allowed him to leave the room. Kazama dutifully bowed civilly before rising to leave, and found a quiet in the corner where he could light his pipe and think in relative peace. But there was no peace to be had, because there was a shinobi waiting right at the door for him, a woman, at that, bearing a very familiar insignia, that of an orchid, a flower that held great meaning to the Oni. If the Imperial Japanese family used the chrysanthemum as theirs, than the ruling family of the Oni would be that of an orchid.

"Kazama Chikage-san, your presence is required by the Princess," the shinobi said to him. She was a woman of tall stature, and a voluptuous frame, crowned with raven-dark hair and violet eyes. There was no doubt that this shinobi was one of the Suzumori clan, for they were forsworn to protect the leaders and the future-leaders of the Yase clan. But the Princess that she had mentioned—he had sensed that it was not Senya. Senya had written to him just before he set out to Kyoto. Her focus would be on helping the new Oni hideouts. It was impossible for her to have come to Kyoto, unless— "Senya-dono is not here at the moment, and has placed her daughter in command of Yase village, and all the activities of the clan to her daughter, Sen-hime."

Sen-hime— Ten years ago, there had been mention of Senya's daughter. If he had not calculated wrongly, she would have been around her late teens by now, definitely already of marriageable age, and also old enough to take up some amount of leadership from her mother. This girl, and Yukimura Chizo's daughter, would be the only girl-children among the great Oni clans in more than a century—it was a great blessing to both the Yukimura and the Yase clans, but now— only the Yase clan had the joys of raising a daughter. He would like to see how this girl turned out, in the ten years of great change ever since the Yukimura clan was destroyed.

The shinobi led him to another room, and opened the shoji doors. In the room was Sen-hime, a lovely child with her mother's chestnut hair and pink-hued eyes. "It is an honor to finally meet the Ojou-sama of

the Yase clan," Kazama greeted her with a curt nod. Whether or not she was the heir of the Yase clan, she was still under her mother's wing, and elaborate greetings were not needed with her.

"It is also mine, to meet the head of the Kazama clan," Sen-hime returned a similar greeting. "My mother sends her greetings to you. She is away in the north, though, helping the northern clans to prepare hiding their villages." It was hard to believe that she was only a teenager from the way she talked and her bearing. She was fanning herself with a purple fan as she spoke to him, and closed the fan gently when she finished. "Kazama, are you and Amagiri well-treated here by the Satsuma-han?"

"You should be asking how many times I've restrained myself from killing those foolish, puny humans in a day," Kazama replied, knowing that Sen-hime was trying to deal with his haughty attitude in stride. He would not make it such an easy job for her, particularly after all the tortures her mother put him through as a child. It would be petty of him to do such a thing, but it would be the only form of entertainment he would have at the moment, and he would savor his chance. "But I must say, you are taking up the rule of Kyoto well enough. Whose idea was it to take control of the Sumiya to gain information, I wonder?"

The girl blushed slightly. "It was my idea," she said with a sort of little giggle. Her mother had been at a loss of what to do to keep track of the news regarding the political activities of the humans, and she had suggested to her mother that they used the Sumiya as a starting point. Senya loved the idea so much that she began to buy out the old proprietors of the establishment, and installed her daughter as the owner, or so the story went. Kazama never doubted the capabilities of Senya in the administration of their people, and by the looks of things, it would seem greatly that her daughter took after her. Information was vital, and the one place to gather information, would be where people congregated in groups of their choosing. Marketplaces could not work because they were too open, too wide, and did not provide a false sense of security from eavesdropping, thus, a restaurant which provided all forms of entertainment to their guests was a brilliant idea indeed.

However, Kazama also had his own gripes against her little stratagem. "Butâ€¦ your sake is too coarse to be served to such distinguished guests," he complained slyly, knowing that the girl would take his teasing into account, and with some degree of unsurety in herself to follow. "Don't worry, I have already sent for a few vats of the best from my own village to be delivered to the Sumiya.

Sen-hime looked to be so angry that her face was red all over. "Kazama Chikage, that was an unfair jest!" she exclaimed, before forcing herself to calm down somewhat. She knew that the most foolish thing she could do was to fall into his trap of incessant taunts.

"It was an honest opinion from a customer," he replied. "If you want to keep the flow of your guests, you will have to improve on that, Sen-hime." The girl held much promise indeed, and would no doubt be the jewel of Senya's eyes. He had absolutely no qualms working with a person like her, in all honesty. "Think of the sake as a form of tribute from my family to yours."

There was nothing more that Sen-hime could do, but to sigh and accept his offer. "Well, since you leave me no choice, I'll thank you before hand," she said. "Now, let's get to business, shall we?" It was a suggestion that Kazama had welcomed very much, for there was much to be discussed with her. "What have you heard from the humans that would affect the lives of our people?" Many generations ago, the Yase-hime of the time had forbidden the Oni clans to interfere with the politics of the humans, lest they brought calamity upon themselves, but in this time, Senya knew that it was too much folly to ask for severances of that nature. However, there was a condition to their participation in the affairs of the humans, none of the Oni should cause undue harm to their own people, unless with valid reason.

"Whilst it is too early to discern the after-effects of the folly of humans in this growing conflict, I have chanced upon a news that might lighten the hearts of the Yase clan," Kazama replied, his teasing tone of voice melting away, replaced by one of duty and all seriousness. "We have caught sight of Yukimura Koudou, the last survivor of his clan, but we cannot tell what his allegiances are, nor can we discern his intentions in working with the humans."

Any remnant of the Yukimura clan would now be protected by the Oni clans, if not for their illustrious surname. Sen-hime knew that she should somehow pay a visit to Yukimura Koudou, but she sensed that it was impossible. If he had wanted contact with their people, he would have known where to search for her family, for they were the protectors of the Imperial Household of Japan. "You suspect that he is hiding something, don't you?" Sen-hime asked Kazama, after a few moments' worth of pondering.

"The air of his presence foul," Kazama pointed out bluntly. "If he has something to hide, then perhaps his designs are not wholesome." He was not one for conspiracy theories, but he realized that there was a great possibility that Yukimura Koudo had dark intentions in his alliance with the Roshi-Gumi. "Has he reported to you?"

Sen-hime shook her head. "He has never approached us," she replied. Every self-respecting Oni knew that Yase was the dwelling of Oni nobility, and all who came to Kyoto would at least make an effort to send greetings to their leaders, just to make their presence known to them, so that the Yase clan could watch over them. It was odd, that Koudou would shun Oni company at all. "What do you think?"

"We cannot know anything until he makes his intentions known," Kazama said. "After all, people are innocent until they are proven guilty, or, until they reveal their stripes." It was getting late, and he knew that he would be missed if he stayed too long away from the function that the Satsuma-han had organized.

"Well, my mother wants me to speak to him soon, because she wants to know how the Yukimura clan was destroyed. It's been ten years since anyone has heard anything from the incident, and an eye-witness account would give some... clarity to the situation," Sen-hime added. It was the one failure of the Oni clans, that they could not come to their kindred in time to give them aid. The Yukimura clan were not pushovers in any case, and although their defenses were not as thick as that of the Kazama and the Yase, the humans should have had a difficult time bringing them to heel. It was downright impossible to have brought the total destruction of so great a family with only

fire and a few guns.

Kazama perked his ears upon Sen-hime's interesting choice of words. "What you mean is, Senya-dono is suspicious that the Yukimura clan might be betrayed," he decoded what she had said. "Your mother might come to a heading, and yes, questioning Yukimura Koudou _would _ provide some clarity. I will do what I can to aid you in your search." As much as he valued the freefom of his actions, he knew that there was more than one angle to view the calamity, and as a fellow Oni leader, he knew that he had to play a part in aiding the prevention of any similar fate in the future.

Sen-hime gave him a curt bow of thanks. "Thank you, Kazama," she said, her voice filled with gratitude.

"Don't mention it," he returned. "It is... heartening, to see you wanting to take after your mother's footsteps," he added. "Perhaps as time passes, you'll be half the Yase-hime she is. He left even before Sen-hime was able to retaliate, and headed back to the room where the Satsuma party was held. "Forgive my absence, I... ran into an old friend."

Saigo Takamori focused his attention upon Kazama. "An old friend indeed," he replied, knowing that there was more than what he had revealed. "You are a man of many means, Kazama Chikage. Perhaps you could utilize them in aiding our _han_."

I am not the master of everything my eyes can see," Kazama shot back, still maintaining eye contact with Saigo. "There are other powers at work here than my clan alone, and I am not the master of all of them. Rest assured that you are not the only ones with eyes and ears in this imperial capital of our country."

* * *

><p>HAN: Ah, Kazama reports himself to Sen-hime. I originally wanted her to be the real Yase-hime, because I cannot think of a way for Senya to die, or rather, retire with some legitimate cause. If anything, she is a kid like Chizuru, and is learning her way around the ropes of leadership. However, it's clearly evident in Hakuouki that Sen-hime is very clear on what kind of a person Kazama is, and how to deal with him. You can see more of the interaction between Sen-hime and Kazama in Hakuouki Sekkaroku Episode 6. I would like to think that my portrayal of the Oni is truer to the games than the anime, particularly Kazama and in his route, and do tell me if I am too much fun fan-servicing myself and am making him too OOC for your tastes.<p>

OniKuShita: Kazama first meets the Shinsen-Gumi during the Ikedaya Incident, and of course, it will be very interesting henceforth. I still have a bit of background storytelling to do before we come to the incident, so please do be patient with me. ^_^ Don't worry, this is a very Kazama-centric fanfic, since it's _his_ prequel after all.

Guest: Thanks!

_Dear Chikage, _

_I hope that my daughter has been kind enough to be your host once you've arrived in Kyoto. She can be stubborn at times, but the girl has the best interests of our people in her heart. I beg you to have mercy on her with that sharp tongue of yours. _

_Now, let us get to business. I have been to the north with Hana-baa's clansmen, and I have heard some startling rumors. They seem to suspect that the massacre of the Yukimura clan did not happen due to the malice and cruelty of the humans alone. There were defenses in that village that only someone in the family could have disabledâ€¦| My daughter told me that you have encountered the survivor of the massacre, and I plead you to seek him out and bring him to me at the Sumiya within a fortnight. This is a matter of utter brevity and I want this rumor quashed with all haste. _

Senya.

* * *

><p>The message from Senya was short and to the point. The Princess of the Yase clan could be strict and stern when needed to be, and such troubling tidings would have definitely unsettled her, and of course, most of the Oni Council, evidently showing that no Oni clan would ever be the same again following the disaster that befell their brothers and sisters of the Yukimura clan. It proved that his instincts were right, that he should retrieve Yukimura Koudou all the sooner.<p>

Thus, once again, from the lodgings of the Satsuma-han in Kyoto, Kazama and Amagiri set out to Mibu village, where Koudou had been first sighted. They would have to start somewhere, whether or not he was really based there. They had a written order for this search from Senya, and was akin to a warrant in human-terms. He would ensure that Yukimura Koudou has his audience with Senya as soon as possible.

"We will enter Mibu village at night," Kazama told Amagiri, knowing full-well that two Oni walking around in daylight would be suspicious for such a suburban setting, particularly due to their coloring, what with them being newcomers to the capital. Nighttime was also when the wolves of Mibu were on the prowl in the heart of the city, which also meant that they would have to avoid those beasts at any cost. There wereâ€¦| disturbing rumors that the Shinsen-Gumi had burnt down inns that turned them down, citing that they had the right to do so, because they were samurai working for the Bakufu. Such entitlement was foolhardy, and utterly stupid, in Kazama's opinion, but they did not make the Shinsen-Gumi any less dangerous.

"As you wish," Amagiri replied. Nighttime would be the time when people involve themselves with suspicious activities go about, thinking that the cover of darkness would aid them. Kazama would be right in choosing the time for their operation. "What will you do when you find Yukimura Koudou?"

"I will do what I am told to do," Kazama answered. "I will bring him to face Senya-dono, and have him answer her suspicions."

Amagiri pursed his lips and furrowed his brow. It was a sign that his mind was unsettled. "Her suspicions are valid, but is it wise for us

to use such force on one that has been through the pain of his family?" he asked Kazama. "Perhaps he avoided our kind to forget his sorrow?"

"Then there is all the more reason for us to find him," Kazama said. "It's been ten years, and we should show our concern towards him. After all, our families have long been allies." He would never forget the counsel and advice Yukimura Chizou had given to him, and that reason alone was enough for him to act on this matter, whether or not he had orders from Senya.

Mibu village at night was a lovely, serene sight. The houses were not as large and luxurious as the ones within Kyoto city. They were smaller, understated. However, as they got closer to the center of the village, they began to hear eerie sounds. They were that of men screaming in pain, their voices unintelligible most of the time.

"What was that?" Amagiri asked, stopping once another blood-curdling wail.

Kazama looked around their surroundings, and tried to find the source of the noise. His eyes turned amber as he used his Oni powers to aid him. However, the closer he felt he had gotten to the origin, the stronger the presence that was cancelling out his effort grew. It was as if someone was hiding something, and would do anything to hide it. It was a counter-productive effort, of course, because he could sense the direction from whence the resistance came, and would also lead him to what he wanted to find.

"That one," he said, pointing towards the house with no lanterns hanging at all. But all of the sudden, the screaming stopped. Quiet reigned over the village, and it was obvious that they were being watched, and their presence was already known. Since the trap had already been sprung, they might as well investigate it thoroughly.

With the speed of their people, they went into the house, and found Yukimura Koudou standing in the courtyard, looking utterly surprised to see them. However, he regained his composure quickly enough, and gave adequate greetings to Kazama and Amagiri. "It is my pleasure to meet you, Kazama Chikage, leader of the Western Oni," he said to Kazama, while bowed graciously to Amagiri.

"The pleasure is mine," Kazama replied gruffly. "Yukimura Koudou, you are expected to be at the Sumiya two weeks from tonight. Your presence is ordered by Senya-dono." There should be no mention of who Senya was. All the Oni knew who their Princess was, and they were expected to follow her orders to the letter.

"The Princess is worried," Amagiri added to soften the aggressive tone of Kazama's words. "She wants to meet with the last survivor of the Yukimura clan, to see if you need anything."

Koudou did not seem to want to move at all. "She has never sought me out before. What use am I to her now?" he asked suspiciously. "I am sure that if the Princess of the Yase clan wish to learn something, she would have had the information at her fingertips by the time she's thought about it." His words were bitter. He was smiling kindly, almost joking as he said them, but Kazama could sense the

irony behind them without even trying.

"You seem to have the answers that she seeks," Kazama replied nonchalantly. "In any case, you know better than to shirk from her summons."

The reach of the Yase-hime was far and wide if she wanted it to be, but his ability to avoid them was greater still. For ten years, they could only gather rumors of him, and nothing more. It made Senya all the more suspicious, particularly following the pieces of evidence they had gathered from the site of the Yukimura massacre, as well as from what she had heard from the northern clans, it would only be natural for Senya to want to speak to Koudou about the fate of his family.

"Know not that you do not have a choice in this," Amagiri told Koudou sternly. "You will answer Senya-hime's call willingly or you can do so in chains."

"Hmph," Koudou replied. "And you would be the ones who would chain me?" he asked them, eyes darting between Kazama's cold, hard gaze, and Amagiri's neutral ones. Then, to their surprise, he sighed. "What kind of subject would I be if I did not meet our ruler, the head of the Oni Council?" His smile was a strange one now, one that reeked of false kindness. Perhaps this was the mask he wore for his patients in Edo?

"Senya-dono would be waiting for you at the Sumiya two weeks from tonight," Kazama told Koudou. "Do not think that you can hide from us, or the Yase Clan once you have taken up residence in Kyoto. Nothing escapes our sight."

Koudou bowed his head in deference. "I will be there, as expected of me," he said. Hopefully he could be expected to hold true to his promise.

With their work done, Kazama and Amagiri disappeared into the dark of the night, they had more work to do.

* * *

><p>Two Weeks Later<p>

* * *

><p>Being a member of the Oni Council meant that Kazama was also expected to attend Koudou's audience with Senya. Thus, there he was, seated to her right, arms crossed, and a bottle of sake right in front of him. There was a great silence in the room, one that he felt was stifling as Senya and Koudou stared one another down. Neither among the two spoke first, and he was in no position to utter the first word. Of course, Koudou had properly paid his respects to Senya as befitting her status, but other than that, no word was said between them at all.<p>

Senya was studying this strange subject of hers. She was trying to understand his psyche. In fact, his silence spoke more words to her than his defiance. It made her realize that there was something that he had feared more than her. "You can speak openly here, Koudou," she told him in the kindest manner possible. "You do not need to fear any

retribution nor punishment."

Those words seemed to have moved Koudou somewhat. He bowed his head low, and he said, "Forgive me, hime-sama, I am have only a tiny drop of Oni blood, and all connection I have with my clan is my surname. I do not know what is expected of me." What he said was true. The Oni might have been a culture that valued their traditions and customs, but these were only enforced upon their rulers, the immediate families of the clans in the Oni Council, while those from the branches were given no great expectation in their rites and rituals. "I thank Kazama-sama for reminding me of my duties."

Kazama nodded cautiously towards Koudou's acknowledgement, and continued his silence. He, like Senya, was still keen on observing his behavior. He could have been from a minor position in the Yukimura clan, but they could easily sense that he was something more than that.

"You are forgiven," Senya proclaimed. "Now, you must tell me what happened to your village ten years ago. We have no eyewitness account of the massacre, and we want to know how better to defend our lands and people from this tragedy." Her pink eyes were filled with seriousness, her voice motherly, but firm. She had wanted to solve the mystery of the destruction of the Yukimura clan once and for all, and she would not allow Koudou to leave until she had her answers.

"They came in the night," Koudou answered, eyes cast down. Kazama thought it to be a ploy, so that they could not read his expression, but within seconds he held his head up again. "They brought cannons with them, and blasted the walls of our village down. When the walls crumbled, and when we tried to escape, they rained fiery arrows upon us. They burned everything down."

Senya sighed. "What of Chizo and his family?" she asked him. Among the heads of the leading Oni clans, Senya was similar in age with Yukimura Chizo, as was Amagiri Kazutarou. Therefore, the fellowship between the three of them would be the same as that between Kazama, Amagiri Kyuuju and Shiranui Kyo. It was how the children from the clans of the Oni Council were raised. She could not count the amount of tears that she had cried upon the knowledge that Chizo had fallen, with his beautiful wife, Natsuko, the fates of their children unknown.

"Chizo-sama watched Natsuko-sama being burnt alive, while a human stabbed him in the neck," Koudou said. "I chanced upon this gruesome sight as I was escaping the carnage," Koudou replied. His face was now blank, as was his voice. "The boy, Kaoru, was taken by the Nagumo clan, I heard. I have no knowledge of the girl."

The Nagumo clan was once a clan of _Hageru Oni_. They were outcasts that returned into the fold of polite Oni society because the Oni Council did not believe that children should be punished for the sins of their fathers. It was quite the revelation, not owing to the fact that the new leader of the Nagumo clan was also named Kaoru. A boy with feminine features. Senya was sure that Kazama had not met the boy before.

"How would you know so much detail, if you were escaping the village when it was burning down?" Kazama enquired further. He found it

strange, that a minor son of the clan was able to come by such important information. He also remembered that Senya had brought up the fact that the defenses of the Yukimura village could only be disabled by someone from the family, and that fact alone was enough to rouse suspicion that Koudou was the one who betrayed his own clan.

Koudou looked deep into Kazama's ruby eyes. "Kazama-sama, I remember clearly that my quarters in the village were at the southern end of the village, and the only way out was in the north. Would it not make sense that I should pass by the center of the village, where the patriarch of our clan resides?" He then continued without even taking a breath. "I remember the fear that coursed through my veins when I saw Natsuko-sama bound and gagged, and the leader of the humans shouting and cursing at Chizo-sama to surrender. Our family is one of peace, but we have our backbones as well. Chizo-sama did nothing, and could only kneel and watch his beloved wife being burnt alive before they killed him!"

There was no way Koudou's words did not influence Kazama in any way. Chizo had been like a brother to him, and when he inherited the mantle of clan-leadership from his father, Chizo had personally made the journey to Kagoshima to help him through his mourning, and aided him in accepting the reins of leadership. To an even lesser degree, the brothers would be brought even closer with the promise of marriage between him and Chizo's daughter, whose fate they still did not know. Kazama could only steel himself, as Chizo had taught him so many years ago, and waited for Koudou to reveal more.

"What of the defenses of the village?" Senya demanded. "The walls of the Yukimura village are not so weak that they cannot withstand cannon fire." She was sure that there was no way that mere human weaponry could be used to destroy the Yukimura walls. She had personally seen to how they had worked many years before the massacre. Like the Kazama clan who used certain sons and daughters who would maintain a web of illusions around the outer perimeters of their village, the Yukimura clan had a somewhat similar strategy. Their healers were not only able to use their Ki to heal injuries, but there were those in the clan who were able to draw Ki from the earth itself to strengthen the walls of the village. These clan-members worked from an area hidden from view and knowledge to all outsiders, and Senya was the only outsider privy to such knowledge due to her position. That was why she had all the reason to suspect the circumstances of Koudou's survival.

Kazama Chikage was no fool. He completely understood what Senya had meant to imply upon hearing her words. "Senya-dono means to ask where you were when you, as a member of the clan, should have gone to your village's defenses," Kazama reinterpreted her words.

"As I have told you, hime-sama, I have little to no ability to wield the powers of our people," Koudou defended. "I can't even conjure a puff of smoke if I wanted to. What use am I to the defenses?"

Sadly, that was the hard truth of the matter. Without proof to incriminate Koudou, Senya could not do anything else but to claim him innocent of the massacre of his clan. However, there was something else that Kazama had reported to her. He and Amagiri had heard strange, pained wailing in his dwelling in Mibu village. She would investigate this matter as well.

"What of the wailing Chikage and Kyuuju heard in your house?" she asked firmly. "How would you explain that?"

"When I escaped the tragedy of my family with the skin on my back, the Bakufu had heard of my expertise in Western medicine andâ€¦" Koudou fell short, and refused to continue. Clearly, he still did not trust Senya to protect him from any spies of the Bakufu. "It is classified information, I cannotâ€¦"

"Very well then, Koudou. Go in peace," Senya finally said, relenting. "You may leave now."

Kazama harrumphed the moment Koudou exited the room. "That was utterly unproductive," he growled. "Senya-dono, you should have used moreâ€¦ force on him."

"If he would not reveal anything under peaceful terms, he would not reveal them under duress and torture as well," Senya reasoned. Decades ago, Kazama would have had Koudou in chains and on a rack to get him to talk, but he was wise enough to realize the futility of violence. "I want you to find out what he is hiding from us. But do not let it distract you from your other missions."

Kazama nodded. "I will," he said with a bow. "I will take my leave now."

Senya did not stop him. He would become increasingly busy as the conflict starts to boil over. "Chikage. Koudou made no mention that Yukimura Chizuru is dead. Perhaps one day you will find her?"

"Senya-dono, as it is, marriage is not my greatest concern," Kazama told her. "Even if Yukimura Kaoru is now Nagumo Kaoru, I won't believe that she is alive until I see her, and I think that it's highly unlikely for that to happen."

"Do not discount every possibility so quickly, Chikage," Senya warned him with a twinkle in her eye. "If little Chizuru is not found, then you would have to marry my daughter, Sen, instead."

Kazama pretended that he did not hear Senya's last sentence and left the room as well, disappearing into the seas of patrons of the Sumiya, and into the Kyoto night.

* * *

><p>HAN: So, this is how Kazama and Koudou become truly acquainted with one another. It seems to be that it's fitting that Koudou does not mention anything about Chizuru to Senya and Kazama because he has plans for the girl. As for whether or not he is a traitor, it doesn't really matter because the fate of the Yukimura clan was not revisited at all in Hakuouki. Kazama only tells Chizuru how they were destroyed in the games and in the anime, and that's it. I hope you do forgive my two-month absence. Life in general caught on and I was unable to find time to sneak in a chapter. But here is the latest one, and I hope that you find it enjoyable!<p>

NeutralEvilz: Naw, I love you too! The reason I chose to write a Kazama-centric fic was actually due to his route in the games. There,

Kazama is not really a villain, and he himself is a victim of circumstance. It was clear that he was in the Satsuma-han because of some form of debt his clan has to the Satsuma government. The Japanese historical details are here to anchor this fic, so that I would have more things to write about other than Amagiri frowning, Kazama strutting around like a peacock and maybe Kaoru being a brat, heh heh!

AnnaChan310 and Ohmissmac: Thank you! May you like this one as well!

SakuraAkatsukiTaichi: Hmmm, I would actually think that reading the Quest first would make the experience of reading this better. Well, it's all up to you!

LeaWolfsfeld: Yes, the boys of the Shinsen-Gumi get to have all the attention, don't they? Otomate seriously needs a spin-off dealing with the Oni in Hakuouki, something more related to the Bakumatsu, as opposed to Toki No Kizuna (which deals with the ancestors of the Oni characters in Hakuouki) that's based on the timeline of the Battle of Sekigahara.

10. The Encounters

"The pups are out and about again," Saigo Takamori said to Kazama as they were having tea in a neutral area of Kyoto city. It was at high noon, and the Roshi-Gumi were on the move, making their rounds through the city. They moved in squads of ten, in a formation wide enough that most pedestrians had to be cleared to either sides of the streets so that they could pass.

"Country bumpkins will never change," Kazama harrumphed. The Roshi-gumi had painted themselves as a brutal force, intolerant of rebels in the city, serving the Bakufu like the dogs they were. They thought themselves to be wolves, but they could never be as fierce. He had heard of rumors that the wolves were also fighting amongst themselves for control of their pack, although he could not confirm the details. "They strut around like decorated peacocks with only two distinguished feathers to their name."

Saigo Takamori could not help but laugh at his analogy. One look at their members would tell that the Shinen-Gumi were made up of young men who really thought that they could defend a crumbling government with just the swing of their katana. Such idealism could perhaps lead them to their deaths one day. They would be better off finding young, pretty wives and starting their families than putting themselves into the line of fire. "I have heard that one Hijikata Toshizou is a military genius," he added. "With the Roshi-Gumi now quickly rising in importance, perhaps he could have caused their sudden brilliance."

"On the other hand, they walk around and kill those that refuse to finance them," Kazama replied. "Not three days ago, two of their men were seen cutting down sumo wrestlers for not giving them due respect as samurai, and just last week, they burned down a furniture shop for selling foreign carpets."

"It would seem that the Roshi-Gumi are split into two factions," Saigo observed from Kazama's findings. "One wants to play the role of

tyrant, upholding all that is untasteful in the ranks of the samurai to preserve old traditions, and the other wants to be the protector, seeking to keep the peace of the city. Which one would have ownership of its soul?"

"The one that survives, obviously," Kazama answered. "But despite everything else, they seem to possess a tiny bit of talent with the katana. Our men would be wise not to pick fights with them needlessly." There had been real-time reports of the efficiency of the Roshi-Gumi in killing their enemies, rogue samurai were easily dealt with by the wolves. They would not be a challenge to him, but Kazama knew that they were not to be trifled with where their skills as swordsmen were concerned.

Saigo agreed with him. "I will inform the men," he said. "And you? Was your journey to Mibu village fruitful?"

"Yes, it was," Kazama replied tersely. "There is nothing much to discuss about said outing, but I would have to deal more with some of my people here in Kyoto."

"Do you answer to a higher power in the circles of the Oni, or do you act alone?" Saigo asked, clearly wanting to know more about this strange ally of his.

"If I told you, I would have to kill you," Kazama said. "I am here for the interests of my village and my family, and that is all you need to know." If the humans knew how Oni society worked, then they would have the ability to exploit them one day. That was why the Oni had lived as far away from humans as possible, although total isolation from that loud, garish species was impossible.

It did not take a fool to know that Kazama meant for Saigo to back off, and it was what Saigo did. They were never meant to be the best of friends anyways, so he decided to leave Kazama's affairs to his own, so long as they did not interfere with their work in the Satsuma-han.

"Oh yes, I will send a group of men to guard the Sakaimachi Gate tomorrow," Saigo told Kazama. "We cannot allow the Choushu-han to enter the palace as freely as they want. We will be assisted by Aizu."

"Oh?" Kazama asked. On the surface, the Satsuma-han hated their neighbor, the Choushu-han in the matters of state deeply. They hated their neighbor so much that they would form an alliance with the Aizu-han, their natural enemies, to stand against Choushu to prevent them from coming and going through the Imperial Palace as they pleased. In truth, it was the feint of all feints. Satsuma had no intention of serving the Bakufu in the long term, and was antagonizing Choushu to only a certain extent before talks of another kind would begin. Their actions would also mean that there would be chance that the Roshi-Gumi, who were sworn to the Aizu-han, would also rush towards the Gate the moment they knew what was going on, and it would prove a highly interesting exchange, given the unpredictability of the newest faction in Kyoto.

"We would like you and Amagiri to watch the proceedings that the Sakaimachi Gate from afar," Saigo said, clearly giving Kazama an assignment. "Report whatever happens there, and do not attempt to

interfere."

Kazama harrumphed again. "It was never in my nature to interfere with your quarrels. I will give my report by sundown tomorrow."

* * *

><p>Amagiri furrowed his red brows for the umpteenth time. Usually, he was a patient being, but seeing the standstill between Aizu and Satsuma against Choushu was ultimately a test on his limits. "Humans often make huge fusses over trivial matters," he grumbled, and looked towards Kazama, who was scowling out of boredom. Both of them were perched on a tree not twenty yards away from the Sakaimachi Gate, and nothing had happened the entire afternoon but the men of Aizu and Satsuma kicking up the dust, mentally preparing for the arrival of the men from Choushou.<p>

"Their attention spans are short, Amagiri," Kazama replied. "They need stimulants, and when they cannot have women or sake, they seek for blood." Having said thus, he sat on the branch he was previously standing on, and leaned against the tree's trunk. "We might as well have a good nap here while we are waiting." The hot summer sun was beating down on all of them, and the coolness of the shade with the lack of scrutiny from their own faction put Kazama in a very good mood for some rest from the heat.

"Yours is even shorter, it seems, Kazama," Amagiri chided, casting a sideways glance on Kazama, who was rapidly falling asleep.

"I am conserving my energy in this blasted heat," Kazama returned, propping his arms behind his head as he leaned in deeper onto the tree-trunk. "You would do well to do the same. If anything, Choushu would not be such fools to enter the palace today, seeing that all of their enemies are guarding their own gate."

It was at this point that Amagiri realized that Kazama's political savvy was often overshadowed by his arrogant demeanor. He appeared to be disinterested and lazy because he already knew what was going to occur. It was not foresight or clairvoyance, it was just him being an excellent strategist and an even better judge of character.

"So what are you expecting to happen?" Amagiri asked Kazama.

"Nothing really," he said, but instead of actually having a nap, he rose slightly, opened his ruby eyes and shot a blast of Ki towards the neighboring pine tree. Amagiri turned towards the direction of his aim and found Shiranui Kyo hanging on a branch, with a pine-cone stuck in his lavender hair. "Shiranuiâ€| has Choushu sent you here to spy on us?"

Shiranui grinned. "Don't flatter yourself, Amagiri," he replied. "I'm just here because Choushu wants to see what Aizu and Satsuma are planning for them, hogging their own entrance to the palace as if they're the masters of the place."

"The same could be said to Choushu, Shiranui," Kazama interjected. "Our side seems to think that your leash-holders are the ones who act as if they own the Imperial Palace."

"Humans are idiots, aren't they?" Shiranui asked. "They should all justâ€¦ I don't know, have a drunken party and sort things out amongst themselves."

"I would be sure to avoid the ensuing mess of bodies should this happen," Amagiri countered, knowing full-well that he had just mentioned a very, very lewd double entendre that would have made even his uptight brother balk. It took all of Shiranui's willpower not to burst out in full laughter lest he fell off from his tree.

Kazama rolled his eyes, but he decided to indulge Amagiri in his rare moment of impropriety. It was at this moment when his acute Oni hearing picked up the coming of dozens of footsteps, arriving precisely at the Sakaimachi Gate. "Shh, be quiet, the two of you," he silenced them, and peered towards the group of men that had just arrived.

There they were, the wolf-pups of Mibu, dressed in all their finery of _asagi_iro_ haori, armed to the teeth. Four men moved at their head, and chief among them was the man that Kazama had once met at the Sumiya, the one dying of debilitating sickness and dementia. He was holding an steel fan, and allowed a man with noble features to talk with the guards posted at the gate.

"We are the Roshi-Gumi," the apparent second-in-command told the spear-holding guard. "We are under the command of the Aizu-han, and are here to report for dutâ€¦"

"I've never heard of such a group," the guard replied. "Leave at once!"

One among them, a long-haired boy with shining azure eyes, asked, "What is going on?" Clearly, the Roshi-Gumi were not given any credence by those guards. Rising stars as they were, the Roshi-Gumi were not as important as they thought themselves to be. It had been a heavy blow to their self-esteem, but still, they would have to persevere if they were to carve a name for themselves.

"There would be some within our own domain that do not know of us," another wolf-pup replied. This one had hair the color of amethyst and eyes of sapphire. The Ki from that boy was strong, and there was no doubt that he was a formidable swordsman, and one of the strongest amongst the Roshi-Gumi. "We still do not have a respectable name as of yet."

The noble-faced man hardened his resolve, and continued to talk to the guards. "Please, could you check with the higher-ups?" he requested politely. "There must be some misunderstandingâ€¦"

The spear-bearing guard lost his patience, and pointed his spear at the noble-faced man. "We have no such orders. Leave _immediately!_"

"He told you to confirm your orders, and you shall go _immediately_!" the dying man roared, knocking the spear away with his steel fan. "Since you have threatened us with your spear, have you prepared to die?" There were gasps of shock all around, and in the trees, Kazama harrumphed with a tone of genuine interest. Still, the guard refused to move. "I am Serizawa Kamo, a loyal patriot of the Bakufu, commander of the Mibu Roshi-Gumi that serves the Aizu-han. You _will_

allow my comrades and I entrance into the palace!"

The guards had no choice but to allow them in.

"They have some amount of bravery," Amagiri observed. "However, if they think that they can force their way into the ranks and bring the eyes of the officials upon them, they are heading in the wrong direction."

"Hmph, they are nothing but howling wolves, working in packs because it's the only way they can function," Kazama berated, watching as they strutted into the palace. "Choushu or not, this is an opportunity for them to ensure that they successfully form an identity for themselves."

Shiranui sighed. "Well, if those wolves want to hunt the Choushu-han down, they're barking up the wrong tree," he said. "They know what's going on, and won't clash with these puppies head to head, name or no."

"Choushu is afraid of them?" Kazama asked Shiranui.

"No, but the rise of the Roshi-Gumi will make things quite difficult for Choushu, particularly if they insist on those stupid patrols they do every day."

"I won't be surprised if those country-wolves receive new honors tomorrow," Kazama predicted. This would not be the only time that they would run into the Roshi-Gumi, and he knew that as the chaos in Kyoto grew, surely the Bakufu would have to rely more and more on these able and willing warriors to help them "keep the peace", which usually meant cutting down rebels left, right and center. It would be very, very interesting to watch them indeed.

* * *

><p>As it turned out, the Roshi-Gumi were granted a new name the following day, as Kazama had prophesized. They were now known as the Shinsen-Gumi, which meant that they were newly-chosen, a symbol that they have been hand-picked by the Daimyo of Aizu to protect the streets to Kyoto city. The new name legitimized their position, and they were henceforth officially authorized to patrol the capital without question.<p>

"There is more news," Amagiri said while Kazama was smoking on his pipe at the tea-house they had taken refuge in from the unforgiving summer heat. "Yukimura Koudou's house has been burnt down. No trace was left at all. It would seem like the Shinsen-Gumi are investigating this."

Kazama widened his eyes as he turned towards Amagiri. "What?" How could it possibly happen? He was supposed to follow Koudou, and learn his intentions and motives. However, after he had recovered from the initial shock of the information, he said, "This might be a rouse. Yukimura Koudou is a crafty man. It is not likely for him to be burnt down for no reason at all."

"What are you suggesting, Kazama?" Amagiri asked.

"If those country dogs are investigating it, Koudou would have meant

something to them," Kazama said. "We would have to follow their trail if we are to find any sign of him."

"When shall we make our move?"

"Presently."

Both Kazama and Amagiri left the tea-house after they paid for their meal, and began once again, their trek towards Mibu village across the city. Out of pure coincidence, they saw two men wearing the haori of the Shinsen-Gumi, walking around the streets, holding up a picture of Koudou, asking everyone if they had seen him.

It piqued Kazama's interest more and more, and he decided that to follow those two men around, to wherever their path might lead them. Surely enough, their search would bear no fruit, and the Oni found themselves in the heart of Mibu village at sundown.

"So much for following the wolf-trail," Kazama grumbled in frustration and decided to walk back to their lodgings. As they moved further and further away from the residence of the Shinsen-Gumi, he realized that there they were being followed. It had started the moment the sun had set, and it had followed them a great distance.

Time passed, and Kazama could have sworn that he saw flashes of red every few moments as the presence came closer and closer to him and Amagiri. He halted in his tracks, and unsheathed his katana. "Who goes there?" he demanded, speaking into the shadows, because he knew that whoever, or rather, whatever, was following them was hidden there.

At first there was total silence, but then, two red lights, suspended in mid-air appeared. No, they were not red lights, but eyes, eyes glowing in an eerie, red light. As the thing emerged from the shadows, they could see that it was a man, but something less of a man. His teeth had become fang-like, and his hair was white as snow.

"Blood! blood! give me your blood!" the man cooed, his katana held high. "I want your blood!"

Amagiri stepped forward and punched the man in the abdomen, sending him flying towards the nearby brick wall, causing a crater upon impact. Such a blow would have killed any man, but this one, this one just jumped out of the brick-crater and headed towards Kazama, who was already in his battle-ready stance, ready to whet his blade with Kazama's blood.

Once the man was within range, Kazama swung his katana and decapitated the man. Blood splattered everywhere, and as the head of the man rolled on the ground, the most peculiar thing happened. Both head and body of that strange man started to disintegrate into nothing but sand.

"How is this possible?" Amagiri asked Kazama. "A man, thirsting for blood, having the regenerative powers of our people, turning into sand upon death!"

"I do not know," Kazama replied. "Senya-dono must be informed of

this. Whatever this manâ€¦ this thing wasâ€¦ he was not created out of the goodness of the hearts of his masters." When he journeyed to Kyoto from Kagoshima, he had expected to enter a new world of lies, deceit and intrigue. But this thingâ€¦ this travesty that was neither Oni nor human took its toll on the treachery that occurred around them.

"There would be more of them, you mean," Amagiri observed. "Who would have created such a monster?"

Kazama shrugged. "Whoever it may be, we should get to the bottom of this, and soon." Kazama had no love for the humans, but if that monster fed on blood, disaster would befall all mankind if there were more of them. He did not hate the humans enough to allow them to be any kind of monster-fodder, nor would he wish such a fate upon them. "Whoever is behind this will bring about the downfall of mankind if they are not careful."

Amagiri nodded, and looked at the pile of sand that had previously been a man. "This thing emerged when Koudou was missingâ€¦ do you think that there is a connection?"

"There might beâ€¦" Kazama sighed, sheathing his katana. "Guessing games would be useless until we know the truth. Come, let's get going."

* * *

><p>HAN: Well, well, Kazama meets the Shinsen-Gumi at last, and he kills off a Rasetsu. Is that not utterly fascinating? I hope Kazama was not too OOC at the end of this chapter. I know that he's a bastard and an asshole, but if anything, Kazama is not a power-hungry maniac at all... well, if you stick to his route like I am in this fic. But this is the beauty of Otome-games, you get to choose how the story goes, and I did so here, heh heh heh. Don't worry, this story will not end at Reimeiroku, as I plan to cover the storyline of Hakuouki until Kazama's attack on the Nishii Hongan-Ji. I also realized that Serizawa met Kazama at episode 10, and the conflict at the Sakaimachi Gate was also at episode 10. Hmmm, it seems a little slow-moving, but then again, it makes sense for me... Does it for you guys though?<p>

Arysen: Chizuru will appear quite soon, I expect!

Annachan310: Oh, thank you very much! I do have a lemon featuring Kazama and Chizuru, if you would like to see it. It's titled "The Wedding Night" and is quite separate between this and The Quest.

11. The Progression

Mid-afternoon. At the height of summer, Kyoto almost seemed to burn in an odious heat, and it was under said heat that Kazama and Amagiri came by the most disturbing of sights. A corpse by the riverside, drained utterly of blood, and two punctures on its neck. It seemed to be done by some sort of monster, as the city's populace had thought it to be, but the two Oni knew better.

They had been attacked by one of the beasts that craved for blood,

thingsâ€¦ not menâ€¦ that had regenerative abilities as great as that of the Oni, and yet, when they expired, would turn into dust and ash. "It would seem that there are more than one of theseâ€¦ monsters," Amagiri observed, decided to use the term the populace of Kyoto had chosen to describe those strange beings. "Where do you think they come from?"

Kazama was silent, thinking of an answer. The last one that they killed attacked them in the vicinity of Mibu village, but they knew not the origins of the creature. "From the shadowsâ€¦" he answered, disappearing into the crowds as more and more people went forwards, wanting to get a look at the corpse, only to shudder away in fear. "Amagiri, do you think that it's strange, that the very night following the burning of Yukimura Koudou's residence, these things start to appear?" he asked Amagiri after many moments of thinking and walking.

"You mean to say that Yukimura Koudou could have a hand in their existence," Amagiri said, building on Kazama's suspicions. "He reported that he was working for the Bakufu, specializing in his fieldâ€¦ But can Western medicine create such monsters?"

"I have no idea at all," Kazama concluded. "But we must find out more about this." He then harrumphed haughtily, and bemoaned the fact that they would have to visit Mibu village yet again, possibly running into the upstart wolf-pups if they were unlucky enough. Although they were all technically servants of the Bakufu, but as Japanese politics would have it, who they were working for, beneath the banners of the Bakufu were also matters of contention.

For any reason, Kazama knew that the balance between Man and Oni had been crossed. It was unnecessarily crossed, and he knew that someone had to put it to rights. Although for whatever reason he felt that this burden was not his to bear as of yet. He was a spy, a protector of mobile warriors of the Satsuma-han, and also, a protector of the Oni, no matter their names. His role did not spread to the innocents implicated by the war. It was not because he would not risk his own life, but it was more because he knew that this fate belonged to others. He would walk his own path, and for now, his path would only lead to the discovery of the evil that was transcended in the streets of Kyoto.

Amagiri understood Kazama's concerns well. "You are walking down a dangerous path, Kazama," he reminded his young charge. "Have a mind as to where your search will lead you to."

Nodding, Kazama was well-aware of the risks that had to be taken. Perhaps his investigations would expose the decay that could have started in the foundations of the Oni council or even the government of Japan, or, perhaps everything would turn out to be just a mere misunderstandingâ€¦ If he had chosen to unearth the existence of those monsters, he would have to be able to accept the realities behind their creation.

"I will need your help on this, Amagiri," he told Amagiri, who had been with him through thick and thin for the past sixty years. He might have been a proud man, but he was not foolhardy. Of course, Amagiri would only aid him to the extent of his capabilities and willingness, and that was more than enough for him.

"This is why I am here for," Amagiri replied. His task there was to aid Kazama, and nothing more.

* * *

><p>The investigations went on for weeks. Although Yukimura Koudou was nowhere to be found, there were still sightings of bloodless corpses, and in the heart of Mibu village, the cries of men, wailing for blood, water and medicine. Kazama had seen those men for themselves. They were chained onto the walls, shackled at their necks. They were weak and gaunt, so starved that their bones were jutting out of their skins. Their hair had gone white, their eyes ruby like that of Kazama's, but that was all the semblance they had to the monster that Kazama had beheaded.<p>

A small man was with them in that hut. He was well-armed for his own sake, but seemed to be comfortable with the men before him being chained as they were. He gave them some sort of white powder, taken with water, and one by one, they were returned to their natural coloring.

"You mustn't rely too much on this medicine," the small man told the chained beasts. "Since their creator was lost, we have not been able to make more of these." The wailing and moaning of the beasts were lessened, and they once again became meek and docile.

"Weâ€| weâ€| are thirstyâ€|" one of the beasts pleaded. "We needâ€| bloodâ€|"

"No! You must be strong," the man refused, clearly having no means to provide them what they needed. "You are all destined for great thingsâ€| you must weather this storm."

"Kill usâ€| kill us!"

Kazama could not watch any longer. He refused to see even these things in their suffering. "They deserve the dignity of death, wretched as they are," he commented. "But these thingsâ€| they are not born monsters. They were createdâ€|"

"To what purpose?" Amagiri asked. "These things are weak and frail without blood. What use can they be?"

"They must be in the early stages of research," Kazama said. "The masters of these men do not know how grave a situation they have gotten themselves into. These things might have the strength and healing powers of our people, but if they are so weak without blood to fuel their energies, they are nothing but plagues on humankindâ€|"

"So, they are nothing but false Oni," Amagiri concluded. "We should report this to Senya-dono before she returns to the north."

Kazama agreed to this without a moment's hesitation. If he knew Senya, she would want immediate updates of this matter, and she would want these things to be exterminated as soon as possible. The Princess of the Yase-clan was not impatient, but she understood the brevity of this strange turn.

Luckily enough, Senya was still in the Sumiya when Kazama sought her

out. "I found the nesting grounds for the monsters that drain the blood of humans," he told her. "They come from Mibu, and were once human beings."

"Humans?" Senya asked. "What human thirsts for blood and have the powers of our kind?" Her pink eyes widened at the strange fact that Kazama had just told her.

"It is the only logical explanation," Kazama said. "I'll need to send for certain texts to be sent from your library at Yase." He had remembered reading something about the subject, and if he was not mistaken, similar creatures were spotted in the memoirs of his ancestor, Kazama Chitose and his contemporaries. The clans implicated in the Battle of Sekigahara had all written their own accounts of the conflict, and they were stored in the Yase clan's library for safekeeping. The collection was known as the "Toki No Kizuna", the Bonds of the Oni Clans, a valuable piece of history, highlighting the importance of peace and closeness between the ruling Oni clans.

Senya nodded and gave him a brush already dipped in ink and paper to indicate the exact volume he needed. "It looks as if someone actually pays attention during his lessons," she teased him as she handed the piece of paper to Kimigiku. A lesser known fact about Kazama was that he was not martially trained until he was much older despite having used a katana to avenge his father's death at ten. His talents were in the inner workings of their people and how to manage them, but nevertheless, his fighting abilities soon eclipsed his true talents where his reputation was concerned. "Your honored father taught you well."

"He wouldn't let Amagiri and me out of the schoolroom until we got everything right," Kazama returned, rolling his eyes. "Obaa-sama continued the tradition after he passed on." His words made Senya chuckle.

"Sometimes I think that you are better suited for my post, scholar and warrior as you are," she added, giggling at how he scowled. He valued his personal freedoms, and were only allowed a few of them. Ten years ago, he reluctantly agreed to one day wed little Yukimura Chizuru just so that he could fulfill the responsibilities he owed his clan. "But you would rather bite your tongue than to agree to do such a thing."

"I will throw it to anyone who dares to insinuate it," Kazama replied and rose from his seated position. "I must leave now, Senya-dono, there are other matters I have to attend to."

Smiling, Senya showed him out of her quarters. "I will be leaving in a few hours as well," she said, but out of a sudden, her expression changed. Her jovial demeanor disappeared, and she sighed. "Chikage, you must not reveal what I will confide in you," she pleaded. When Kazama gave her a curt nod, she continued, "I fear that if this human foolishness cannot be contained, it will be moved to the North, perhaps to Hakodate and its surrounding areas. That is why I spend my days there to placate the northern clans, and to ensure that they are well-prepared for any eventuality."

"Your hunch is safe with me," Kazama reassured her. Although she was not astute in the affairs of the humans, Senya had a highly accurate

gut feeling. Her ancestors always had some form of clairvoyance in their blood, and he knew well to trust her instincts. Having said his farewell to Senya, he returned to the lodgings of the Satsuma-han in Kyoto, where Amagiri was waiting for him.

It took three days for the Yase clan to deliver the book Kazama requested. His assumptions were proved correct, that an ancient villain, Shuutendouji, had imported a form of concoction from the West, called "Sentan" in their time. The medicine had no name as of yet in the present, but the effects were the same when they were described by the authors who contributed to the Toki No Kizuna.

"Thus, in short, you suspect that an Oni has once again brought this foul thing back to our country," Amagiri concluded. "To what end, though? Is this senseless fighting between the humans not enough?" There had news that Serizawa Kamo, one of the two commanders of the Shinsen-Gumi was killed by his own men. No one knew who gave the order, or which members of the Shinsen-Gumi did it, but Serizawa was found dead in the Shinsen-Gumi's own lodgings. His death was immediately reported to the Aizu-han, and full command would be given to Kondo Isami. If even the Wolves of Mibu could not hold their act together, what more could be expected of the rest of them?

"It is a disgusting thought, but we have no choice but to get to the bottom of this," Kazama stressed. "Yukimura Koudou must be found at all costs."

"As you wish," Amagiri said. He would soon be off on his daily rounds with the Satsuma agents, leaving Kazama some free time to read. He wanted to scrutinize the book the Oni ancestors left them more thoroughly, in part wondering if history really worked in cycles. Figures like his ancestor, Chitose, Yukimura Kazuya, Amagiri Kazutake and the like—did they fight in the Battle of Sekigahara for their own ideals, for their own goals, in line with their duties in a time when the foolishness of humans tore their nation apart? Did it only take two and half centuries to destroy any semblance of peace that was built upon a foundation of blood?

Unable to find answers of such existential nature, Kazama lighted his pipe and inhaled deeply. He looked out of his window, seated casually on the windowsill, not caring that his leg was exposed. No one would ever think to look up in the road that he was facing anyways. With little else to do, he started people-watching.

There were brats running around as usual, their mothers scolding them for forgetting their hats and sandals, laborers moving different wares to and fro— They were all humans, and he knew that they had no inkling of how much their lives would darken in the coming days. It was still early in the year— and the plans that had once been only ideas and hopes were soon becoming concrete, and those plans would wreak destruction upon this fair city.

It would be such a waste though. As violent and foolhardy the humans were, he could not deny that they had built a very beautiful capital for their country. Nothing, neither fires, earthquakes nor war and famine, could ever destroy the beauty of Kyoto city, situated in the shadows of her own mountains, graced by thousands of ancient temples and of course, the Imperial Palace. Engineering had never once been a talent of the Oni, and thus, he could not help but admire the humans'

abilities in construction. Soon, the sun began to set, and the city was bathed in orange light, as if it was aflame. The humans on the streets then retreated to their homes, and when the moon replaced the sun in the skies, everything fell quiet.

If one were keen on the tales that were told of that era, one would have heard of a rumor that the Kyoto Shoshidai was cut down by a hitokiri under the employ of the Choushu-han, but it was only that, a rumor. The Shoshidai was in fact attacked by a false Oni, too far away from Mibu. The official was lucky enough that Kazama was in the vicinity, and fainted in utter shock when Kazama cleanly sliced the monster into two vertically. The existence of that monster so deep in the heart of the city alerted him to the fact that its creator had most definitely moved away from Mibu, despite that Yukimura Koudou was nowhere to be found.

"Who are you, young man?" the Shoshidai asked Kazama, panting out of the shock of the attack.

"I am Kazama Chikage of the Satsuma-han," Kazama replied, knowing that nothing good would come out of offending the deputy of the Shogun in Kyoto. He watched the Shoshidai taking a handful of the ash that had formerly been his attacker. "Do you know of thisâ€ monster?"

The Shoshidai looked at Kazama in the eye and gave him a discreet nod. "They were commissioned by the Aizu-han," he answered. "That is all I know. Thank you for saving my life."

Neither the Shoshidai nor Kazama would ever mention of their encounter to anyone, but one thing was for sure. Kazama now realized that he could not actively pursue the monsters anymore. Doing so would only alert their creator, forcing them into advanced levels of seclusion. He should have known that his prey would definitely have some form of eyes on him. He would have to ease up on his investigations and make his actions less conspicuous in order to be able to spring the trap.

At least he now knew that the Aizu-han was responsible for the creation of those monsters. With them being found and housed in Mibu, it would only mean one thing: that the Shinsen-Gumi, the most active servants of the Aizu-han was behind this directly. However, knowing how his prey had worked, he knew that it would be utterly useless to confront the peasant-wolves openly, but he would have to bide his time.

* * *

><p>He would have no time in the coming months to pursue this shadow that utterly haunted his mind. Summer would turn into autumn, and autumn welcomed winter. For six months, he was trapped in unending rounds of negotiations, body-guard duty and even more revelry for every little achievement that they had gained. For six months he had seemed to regret his choice to join the mess that was Japanese politics of the time.<p>

"If I have to escort Saigo to another round of drinking, my brains will melt," Kazama groaned. He was not unwilling to be relegated into being a mere bodyguard, but he was unwilling to be in constant company of humans. Bureaucratic humans made his experience one of the

worst ever in his lifetime.

Shiranui roared in laughter. They were all in a noisy restaurant in Osaka, chosen for the reason that it would be impossible for them to be eavesdropped. "You need to let loose a little, Kazama," the lavender-haired Oni suggested, slapping Kazama on the back like only an old friend could. "Amagiri agrees with me, right?"

"It is not in our mandate to make light of the situation we are in," Amagiri replied rather truthfully, as was his nature. However, the very fact that the three of them were there in the cold winter's night, drinking together, said much about the current stagnation of the events in Kyoto. It was of course, winter, and perhaps the cold in the capital city made movement a little difficult.

Kazama however, lost interest in the conversation of his fellow Oni compatriots. His attentions were turned towards a teenager, who seemed to be around sixteen, more or less, armed with just a wakizashi. Instantly, he thought that the child was an utter idiot, but his eyes were soon upon the wakizashi itself. He had seen it before.

The teenager soon finished eating and signaled for the proprietor to pay for the dinner he had just ate. Kazama then realized that the teenager was not a boy, but a girl. Kazama then realized that despite the lack of proper weapons, the girl was rather smart to be dressed as a boy. She would have been easy prey if her gender was revealed, whether or not she was in the capital. However, there was something more about the girl. Her eyes they were a highly familiar shade of brown, one like that of honey, one that was highly known to him. It was the Yukimura brown, the color of Chizo's eyes.

It was as if his body had betrayed him. He stood up suddenly, and almost hearkened to the girl had Shiranui not shout because his abrupt movements caused him to spill his tea. "What's wrong with you, Kazama?" Amagiri demanded. "You seem to be out of it."

Rubbing his temples, Kazama groaned. "I must be seeing things," he replied. "I thought I saw a girl bearing the Shotsuuren."

Shiranui stopped fussing with his apparently burnt hand, and furrowed his brows at Kazama. "You're definitely getting crazy by the day," Shiranui commented. "Wasn't it lost with the Yukimura clan?"

"I must be seeing things from all this boredom," Kazama concluded, and resumed his dinner. Yes, he was most definitely seeing things.

* * *

><p>HAN: Hello everybody! I'm back for the semester holidays, and I hope that you guys missed me! This chapter features a very integral character to the Hakuouki universe, which definitely signifies that the plot of this fic has already ventured into Hakuouki proper. Yes, the teenager in the restaurant is Chizuru! I made them "meet" in Osaka because it wouldn't be fair for the Shinsen-Gumi boys not to have the "official" first meeting with her heh heh. I wanted to slot her in the middle of this chapter, BUT then I remembered that Hakuouki episode 1 was in winter. So yeah... enjoy!<p>

(Note: I also put in a little tidbit from another anime favorite of mine in this chapter. Let's see if you can guess who this character is!)

AnnaChan310: Here she is! Thanks for loving "The Wedding Night"!

Kagome Pureheart: Thank you for your kind words! Of course, Chizuru and Kazama will have a proper "first look" at one another during the Ikedaya Incident in the future, so I hope that this would suffice for now.

Rei Eien: Yes he is a very... enticing character, no?

Arysen: Ah thank you! In the games, Kazama takes on many roles depending on the route or situation. He even ends up wooing Sen-hime in Heisuke's route instead of Chizuru, while in the Bad End for Harada, Chizuru ends up being a literal broodmare for him. So... yeah. I guess that for The Quest and The Journey, I'm taking cues from his route instead, where we see him as this noble antihero. In his own tale, Kazama is brooding, but wise. He is shown to highly care for those of his own kind, and only antagonized the Shinsen-Gumi because it entertained him. Well, we shall see in the Journey that their destinies really are similar. Heh heh heh.

12. The Missions

Shiranui Kyo was happily minding his business, walking around the streets of Kyoto when he bumped into his long-time friend Takasugi Shinsaku, the commander of the Kiheitai among all things. He and Takasugi had a long history together. They knew each other when they were teenagers. Takasugi had been a student of the famed Yoshida Shoin then, and they became friends solely because they found each otherâ€¦| interesting, to put in their own words. "I have something to show you," Takasugi told him. In the grand design of all things, the Kiheitai was the militia arm of the Choushu-han. Created by Takasugi, it absorbed every fighting man loyal to their domain, those that wanted to fight for their freedom from the tyrannical Bakufu.

They went back to the headquarters of the Choushu operations. It was strangely empty in the afternoon, but Shiranui was hardly bothered by it. Everyone in their faction had been busy with their own duties that it was hard to see everyone in one place these days. "I'm meeting with a foreign weapons merchant in the Tantora, and I want you toâ€¦| observe our conversation," Takasugi said. Shiranui blinked. There was never a time when Takasugi had such an air ofâ€¦| dire need around him.

"Why would you want me, of all people, to do that?" Shiranui asked the human.

"I'd like to get a second opinion on things," Takasugi replied. "Besides, I have a feeling that this man is not to be trustedâ€¦|"

"If you won't trust him, why buy weapons from him?"

"That's because the French is planning to woo the Bakufu. I have no

choice but to rely on a British merchant."

"Aa, suit yourself then," Shiranui sighed, relenting. "I'll be there."

"Thank you. Don't be late."

Thus, at the allotted hour, Shiranui settled himself in the shadows of the balcony of the room that Takasugi had favored in the Tantora, an upscale restaurant favored by the Choushu-han for obvious reasons: the Sumiya was the one frequented by too many Bakufu agents.

It was not long after Shiranui arrived that Takasugi's guest opened the doors to the room and admitted himself in. He was a foreigner all right, one with shining emerald eyes and long, flowing hair the color of the sun. To be quite honest, Shiranui was used to being around golden-haired men due to the company of a certain Oni chieftain, but he had to admit, this foreignerâ€¦ beautiful in a masculine sort of way. He just had a sort of grace that Kazama did not possess for some reason.

"Glover, nice to see that you could come," Takasugi said to the foreigner in greeting, extending his hand to the fair-haired one, a greeting that Shiranui knew had Western origins.

"Of course I would, Takasugi-san," the foreigner, whom Takasugi named as Glover, replied smoothly, without any hint of an accent. "Your company is always greatly appreciated." Then, the negotiations for the Choushu arms deal started.

Glover had come with a briefcase filled with many intricate pictures of Western weapons. Cannons that could shoot further than any arms that the Bakufu had, guns that shot hundreds of bullets as long as their cranks were turned, and far more efficient rifles. There was even a point in a conversation where Takasugi even expressed his interests in buying a fleet of warships, whichâ€¦ would be a rather great stretch at the financial abilities of the Choushu-han.

In the end, Takasugi decided upon several Gatling guns, Howitzers and many hundreds of rifles. These were only initial purchases, used only to arm the Kiheitai as an experiment of their military strength. Once Glover had prepared the necessary papers, he would deliver them to Yamagata Aritomo, who would give him the funds needed.

"With theseâ€¦ we would at least have the hope to shake the Bakufu at its very foundationsâ€¦" Takasugi sighed. At this point, he could only so much training to the Kiheitai, but if the rest of his companions could not keep up the pace and make enough impact for the Kiheitai to be mobilizedâ€¦ their armament would go to waste.

"Then, perhaps I should interest you in this," Glover continued, holding up a vial of red liquid. There was a sudden chill that went up Shiranui's back as he watched the exchange move to a slightly bizarre turn.

Takasugi laughed when Glover handed the vial to him. "Whose blood is this, Glover?" he asked, almost opening the vial. "Did you kill anyone to get this?"

Glover chuckled lightly. "Its viscosity is not as thick as blood is,

Takasugi-san. We call this the 'elixir' in my language. It can recover the sick or cause those of normal abilities to gain great powersâ€¦ in short, you can create gods with this."

"Do you take me for a child?" Takasugi demanded. "Surely thisâ€¦ thing cannot do all that?"

"Oh, but it can," Glover answered. "You know this in your Japanese tales. Here, the elixir is known as the 'Ochimizu'" The Ochimizu was also known as the Water of Life, and could grant immortality to all who drink it. "You will need it to create an undying army, would you not?"

Takasugi shot a dirty look at Glover. "I think you're going too far, Gloverâ€¦" his voice was so low that resembled more of a growl than a perfectly enunciated sentence. "Justâ€¦ take it away and look for Aritomo when the papers are drawn up. If you really want to sell me something else, I'd like a case of that grape wine that you brought with you when we first met."

Glover nodded and stored the Ochimizu amongst his personal effects. "Very well then, I'd give you the wine as a gift with yourâ€¦ generous purchase," he replied. "However, I must warn you that if you do not purchase the Ochimizu sooner or later, I'll have to sell it to the highest bidder."

"Who would ever want such a thing?" Takasugi asked Glover, unable to even comprehend the foolishness of such a thing.

"Japan is not as small as you think, Takasugi-san," Glover answered plainly. "I could go to the Northâ€¦ or evenâ€¦ the Bakufuâ€¦"

Takasugi only let out a defeated chuckle. "You really have no scruples, don't you? After all, you are a 'merchant of death'," he said.

"We all do what we must to survive in this world, Takasugi-san," Glover returned, "I shall be seeing you soon then,"

"Aa, sayonara."

When Glover left, Takasugi walked over to the balcony and admitted Shiranui into the room. "You should drink this," he told his Oni friend before Shiranui even spoke, pouring him a generous cup of sake. Hastily offering his thanks, Shiranui finished the cup within a few gulps. "So, what did you think about everything?"

In a rare moment, Shiranui shrugged his shoulders, which was strange to Takasugi. As lackadaisical he might seem to the affairs of the world, Shiranui actually had some deep wisdom embedded in his mind, and often expressed it in plain, easily accessible notions. "It soundsâ€¦ sketchy, what the foreigner is sellingâ€¦ butâ€¦ there is rumor that someone has been creating false Oni. They're monsters that crave for blood and are very hard to kill and whatnot."

"That would look very interesting indeed," Takasugi interjected. Of course, he knew that Shiranui was an Oni. Everyone in Choushu knew that the Shiranui clan was a famous Oni family. They were the protectors of the domain, and were somewhat regarded as deities in

his grandfather's father's time. But Shiranui Kyo, in particular, he was a different sort of Oni, and was more accessible to the humans around his family. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that he was not the immediate heir of his clan. Oni were sticklers for successions and duties, if the rumors were true. That's why he could get along with Shiranui.

"I'm not joking, Takasugi," Shiranui explained. "There were first-hand accounts of those things all over the city. Although I can't really prove that this Ochimizu and the false Oni have anything in common, but you must be careful. I can't say much but my people are taking these monsters very seriously."

At his words, Takasugi nodded. "Alright, I'll keep my eye on Glover then," he said. "Will you report this to your superiors?"

"I have to," Shiranui said. He did not want to face the consequences of not disclosing such an important piece of information, first of all from Senya and secondly from Kazama. Yes, it was possible to fear Senya more than one could fear Kazama Chikage, because although Senya was kindly, wise and maternal for the most part, her influence was deep and far, thus even if he incurred a small amount of her wrath, the entire Oni community could have heard of it and amplified said wrath onto him manifold (he learned it the hard way, trying to hide her favorite jade hairpin as a child. A distant cousin based in Hakodate came right down to Hagi to give him a beating because of it, and he vowed to never again anger Senya in any way.)

"Well then, good luck to you on that front," Takasugi said. "Are you sure that you won't join the Kiheitai?"

Shiranui paused as he pondered on that front. "Nah, I'm of better use to you as I am now, trust me," he answered. This would not be the first time Takasugi approached him to join the Kiheitai. The position that was offered was one of leadership, and Shiranui declined. He was never a leader, but neither was he a follower. To put it simply, he would serve Choushu's interests, but only in his own way and terms.

"Oh well, having you around might make things a little more interesting," Takasugi sighed. "I'll see you again soon then."

* * *

><p>The first person Shiranui went to was of course, Kazama, who seemed to be utterly engrossed in a history book and not in the news that he was about to give him. "Go away, Shiranui, I'm busy," Kazama said gruffly.<p>

"What I'm about to tell you is important!" Shiranui exclaimed. "I'll bet you'll burn down that book after you listened to me!"

Those words seemed to have piqued Kazama's interest in the smallest measure. "You would not do such a thing, Shiranui," Kazama said, turning away from him after meeting Shiranui's lilac eyes for the swiftest moment. "This book is worth ten thousand of your lives."

"Kazama, you arrogant bastard, won't you just listen for once?"

Shiranui practically shouted.

Sighing, Kazama decided to finally acknowledge Shiranui fully. "Very well, what is it that you wanted to tell me?"

"I think I know what caused the appearance of the fake Oni," Shiranui answered, quite proud of himself having uncovering such an important piece of information. "Some foreign arms merchant brought it into the country, and he's going to sell it to the highest bidder!"

"The Ochimizu has already been sold," Amagiri said, shooting down Shiranui's faint moment of pride. "We have news from the Kyoto Shoshidai that the Aizu-han is responsible for the creation of the false Oni."

Finally, Kazama put his book down and looked at Shiranui directly. "Who sold and bought the Ochimizu is no longer important, Shiranui. What we should do now, is to discern who is planning to use it. I killed two of those beasts myself, and I can safely say that these things are mere fakes. We cannot stand for such atrocities to exist." His pride as an Oni might have formed those words, but Shiranui also understood that if the fakes increased in number, and if their thirst for blood existed, any fool who used the Ochimizu to create an army of them would only destroy the delicate balance between the humans and the Oni. No sane person could ever want such a fate upon their own countrymen, no matter what kind they were.

"Understood," Shiranui replied. Kazama might be an arrogant bastard, but at the very least, he had some form of clear-headedness that the leaders of the humans did not have. "So, what are we going to do?"

"We double our efforts in searching for Yukimura Koudou. He once said that he was entrusted with a 'terrible secret' by the Bakufu, because he was proficient in Western medicine. We must put a stop to this foolishness at once," Amagiri answered. "However, there is another thing of note—Kazama seems to be certain that he spotted Chizo-san's Shoutsuuren in Osaka the other day."

"Chi— Chizo-san?" Shiranui stuttered. "Are you sure that you're not seeing ghosts?"

Kazama's eyes turned cloudy, a sign that he was activating his powers that enabled him to project anything that he had seen before and he showed them the hilt of the wakizashi that he had seen in Osaka. It was highly evident from the design of the hilt and the tsuba that it was the real thing. One of the great Oni traditions would be to pass on certain weapons like katana from generation to generation. The Yukimura clan had the Daitsuuren and Shotsuuren, and the Kazama clan had the Douji-giri Yasutsuna, a mythical katana that was said to have killed the Shuuntendouji in the beginning of the Tokugawa Era. Kazama did not currently wield that katana, being a highly prized heirloom, and had his own katana made.

"So— you'll want to return to Osaka to look for the person who has the wakizashi?" Shiranui enquired. "Wouldn't that be searching for a needle in a haystack?"

"I have a feeling that the person wielding it would be coming here," Kazama answered plainly. "Whoever that girl was, she would most

certainly look for her only surviving relative, Yukimura Koudou, who we know for sure, was last seen in this city."

"What about the katana, Daitsuuren?" Amagiri asked. "If the wakizashi survived, then most certainly, its mate must have been recovered from the Yukimura village."

Kazama had an answer to that. "Yukimura Koudou told Senya-dono and I that Yukimura's son was adopted by the Nagumo clan. He is now their chief," he commented. If that was true, then the boy would forever be known as Nagumo Kaoru and no longer Yukimura. He would have forfeited his right to be a clan-leader of the clan he was born to. It should not have been so much of a loss, but in the light of recent events, it would seem that there was a large possibility that Koudou and Kaoru were not the only survivors of the destruction of their family.

"You have a lot on your plate, Kazama," Shiranui noted. "Between working for the Satsuma-han, and solving the mystery of the Oni fakes, are you sure you want to add looking for all the Yukimura survivors into your list?"

In truth either one of those tasks was a monumental one to be taken alone, missions that would have caused most men much grief. But Kazama was not like most men. In his heart of hearts, he knew that all three would fall under his list of duties to be completed in his time in Kyoto, and he would most certainly not return to Kagoshima until he completed each and every one of them. He would just have to complete those tasks simultaneously, stretched over the period of conflict that the humans had created.

Thus, he merely raised an eyebrow at Shiranui in an attempt to undermine his suspicions. "I intend to complete these missions, even if they create a never-ending journey," he answered Shiranui haughtily. In fact, each and every one of those tasks could only be borne by him among the three of them. While Amagiri's family also owed the Shimazu daimyo a land-debt, his can be settled under Kazama's, seeing that the Amagiri clan were the vassals of his; Senya had personally put him to task in determining the roots of the mystery of the false Oni, deciding that her most able lieutenant in the Council should be enough to deter anyone with half a brain from attempting such atrocities; and finally, he still had yet to pay his dues to Yukimura Chizo for guiding him in his youth. Unable to save his friend and his family in their utter time of need, and also, somehow remembering that he was engaged to Chizo's lovely daughter, made him realize all the more the possibility that the girl he saw in Osaka _had to be_ Yukimura Chizuru. She seemed to be at the right age, and was bearing the right wakizashi, but he would have to see for himself to ascertain her identity.

In the eyes of his clan elders, it would be the third one that would finally redeem himself in their eyes. It would be the only thing that would allow him to keep their noses out of his affairs. The five elders, including his grandmother, had been nothing but hawks in his administration of his clan. Financially and defensively, he had ensured that the Kazama clan and their holdings could weather any storm, but still, without his own heir, they still were a bit worried about him. They wanted an heir from him because they knew that any form of security that he had created for their clan would wash away if he had the bad luck to pass onto the next realm before

they did. It was a form of insurance for them and their clan as a whole, to put it rather harshly.

To get an heir, he would have to have a wife. When he realized that if he did not want to marry Senya's daughter, and yoke his family to the Yase clan in a second manner, his only choice left was Yukimura Chizuru, the only girl left in his generation. That option should have been eliminated, but now that he had seen the Shotsuuren, his hope that the girl was alive had increased to heights that he could not have had ten years ago. Since the possibility of Chizuru's existence now also depended on the rediscovery of Yukimura Koudou's whereabouts, he would have to locate the latter, which would then solve the riddle that Senya had given him.

In all irony, the fact that his allegiance to Satsuma was the easiest one to resolve. He would serve until they were either utterly defeated or they attain unquestionable victory. His duties to them were the clearest-cut. He was to appear when needed, kill whomever he was required to kill, and disappear into the shadows. It might have seemed that this was the sole reason that he was in Kyoto, in the middle of the conflict that would soon plunge the nation into a state of civil war, but, it would seem now that it would be only a vehicle for him. If it were not for his hereditary debt to the Satsuma-han, he had no reason to be in Kyoto at all, and would then be unable to have uncovered the other two missions that he had to embark.

"Kazama," Shiranui sighed, after listening to what he had to say. "You're either the most egoistical man in this living world, or you're the most driven one there is."

"It's a little bit of both, I would think, Shiranui," Amagiri added to the comment about Kazama. Vassal or not, he had known Kazama long enough to be able to speak clearly about him without fear of repercussion.

Kazama left the room with a hasty harrumph, knowing that his counterparts were complete right about him.

* * *

><p>HAN: Shiranui might just have the spotlight in this chapter, but as always, the star is still Kazama. I thought it necessary to put the scene between Takasugi Shinsaku, Glover and Shiranui, originally from Urakata Hakuouki, into this chapter because it explains how Yukimura Koudou could have gotten the Ochimizu. Of course, Glover is one of the routes in Urakata Hakuouki, but if you play through Takasugi's route, Glover will become the villain, much like Kazama in Hijikata, Harada and Saito's. Also, we start to see *why* exactly Kazama wants Chizuru as his wife, which is of course, central to this fic itself. Oh, and another thing, Shiranui's family are somehow subordinate to Kazama's not in a manner alike Amagiri's (in how I have set Amagiri's allegiance to Kazama in this fic and also "The Quest"). The seat of the Shiranui clan is in Choushu, but because Kazama is also the chief of the Western Oni, which also includes Choushu, he has to obey Kazama to some extent. This is perhaps why Shiranui actually calls Kazama as "Taisho", or "Captain".

AnnaChan310: The entire premise of this fic and "The Quest" lies on

what you have observed, actually. We all know that Kazama is after Chizuru because she is a pure-blooded Oni girl, but what makes her so different from Sen-hime (unless you look at Heisuke's route, where he actually is betrothed to Sen-hime at the end). I think that there is no difference between the goals. If he needs to bring more powerful heirs into the world, he needs a pure-blooded Oni female. If he has fallen for Chizuru, then it would only solidify his need to marry her. I hope that this answers your question well enough

^_^
—

CloudCarnivore: Actually there are quite a few Hakuouki games. Yes, you do get to choose who ends up with Chizuru. In my case, I was very, very attached to Hijikata, but have grown to also enjoy Chizuru with Kazama, Harada, Saito and Souji in that order. I have not played Heisuke's route yet because it did not interest me too much.

13. The Ones That Have Passed

"The Scottish merchant, Thomas Blake Glover, is an Oni," Sen-hime told Kazama, Amagiri and Shiranui when the three of them headed to the Sumiya to report their findings to her. "We have had contact from another Oni clan in England, and they warned us about him. He and his kind thrive by consuming the blood of others, and the Ochimizu was created from his blood—that is why the humans that drink it cannot have our powers unless they drink blood."

Once again, the wide reach of the Yase clan had been proven to be even further than Kazama had expected. It was common knowledge that the Oni did not only reside in Japan, but were found all over the world, but even he could not imagine that the Yase clan had contact with other Oni clans outside of Japan.

"Does your contact in England plan to do anything about him?" Amagiri asked Sen-hime, who sadly, shook her head.

"Glover is the equivalent to a hageru Oni to the British Oni," Kimigiku, Sen-hime's aide answered. "The Adams clan, the leading clan there, have renounced all ties with him and his."

Kazama harrumphed. "We do not need to concern ourselves with one shifty weapons merchant or another," he proclaimed. "The Ochimizu has appeared in Japan before, under the name of 'Sentan' during the beginning of the Tokugawa Era, and those that consumed it are called 'Rasetsu'." Having said thus, he returned the book he had borrowed from Senya to Sen-hime. "I will not stand for the continuation of the production of fake Oni. They are an insult to our kind."

Sen-hime offered nothing but a quiet sigh. "We would have to take this patiently and slowly, if we are to stop the culprits at the source," she said, knowing that she had only mentioned the most obvious. They were Oni, and had plenty of time in the world, but now that their affairs had trickled onto the humans', they no longer had the advantage of time. "Kazama, do you have other things you would like me to pass to my mother?"

"None whatsoever," Kazama said, virtually ignoring Amagiri and Shiranui's efforts to hide their surprise. They had half expected for him to inform Sen-hime about his sighting of the Shotsuuren, but said aught else when he did not mention it. "If there aren't other things

of great import, then I will take my leave."

Sen-hime nodded, and allowed them to leave after the customary bows were exchanged. Kimigiku, on the other hand, suspected something else. "Kazama Chikage is hiding something from you," she told the princess. "I can't put my mind on what it exactly is, butâ€¦"

"I sensed it too," Sen-hime replied. "But whatever it is, we have to remember that my mother trusts his judgments, and we must do the same." It was not up to her at that point in time for her to decide how Kazama should make his movements. Her mother's words were law, and it applied to all, even to her. "Hahaue always said that no matter what he does, it will be for the good of our people, and we must trust that she is right."

* * *

><p>Thus, winter passed in Kyoto with little effect. The Shinsen-Gumi had been given new quarters by the Aizu-han and were moved into the center of the city from Mibu, but still, they held onto their moniker of being the Wolves of Mibu. The appearances of the Rasetsu had somewhat lessened, which made it clear to Kazama that the winter's chill had some effect of numbing down the idiocy committed by the humans.<p>

There had been news from Shiranui that the Scottish Oni had sold more weapons to the Choushu-han, including at least one warship, specially commissioned by Takasugi Shinsaku for the peruse of the Kiheitai. Rumor of the great armament ran up and down the Imperial Court, but the Bakufu could find no evidence that the Choushu had been trading with foreigners. Shiranui had recounted that all the dealings between Glover and Choushu took place in China, and the weapons were smuggled into Hagi city.

"It is interesting indeed," Amagiri observed. "All this veiled politicking and concealed illicit trade will one day irk the Bakufu, and they would have the proper reasons to rebel against the Shogunâ€¦"

"I question Choushu-han's ability to man the weapons that they have bought," Kazama added. At their largest, the Kiheitai numbered around three to four hundred. The Bakufu's forces, at full count, would be around fifteen thousand. They needed as many men as they had guns. Western-style training and western weapons meant little if they did not have at least a moreâ€¦ favorable number if they were to have any hope of survive open rebellion against the Bakufu.

"What do you think they would do?" Amagiri asked Kazama. "You went to the meeting with Saigo and Ohkubo, what are their designs for Choushu?"

At this moment, Kazama let out a crooked smile that almost gave a hint of his teeth, so sharp that they almost resembled fangs. "They have a task for us, Amagiri. We are to watch over the activities of Choushuâ€¦ to look for opportunities for an alliance."

Shiranui almost spat out his tea. "What?!"

"Don't look so surprised," Kazama replied. "The Shimazu daimyo had wanted this all along, that is why Saigo Takamori and Ohkubo

Toshimichi are in talks with the Tosa-han. Apparently, Sakamoto Ryouma is the mediator." The Satsuma-han was one of the richest domains in Japan, and with the distance between Edo and Kagoshima, the Shimazu clan had begun plotting its own rebellion. Its rivalry with Choushu and the Mori clan might have just been a cover for all they know. "Currently, Satsuma are expanding their horizonsâ€¦ of course, everything would be done covertly."

"That means that soon, we would have to spy on Choushu for Satsuma," Amagiri concluded. "You have known this all long, Kazama?" Unlike the humans, the Oni of Choushu and Satsuma were considered close allies. It would have suited the Oni Council much more, knowing that the three clans from both domains would one day fight on the same side. But then againâ€¦ the Oni Council did not realize that Shiranui was there in Kyoto for political reasons at all. Senya had been on the impression that he was there because both Amagiri and Kazama had their duties in the capital, due to old time's sake.

"Ever since your brother Kazutarou and I entered Kagoshima Castle," Kazama answered. "Shimazu Hisamitsu was veryâ€¦ explicit about what _we _as Oni should do in the service of Satsuma, but he never once stated the full measure of Satsuma's allegiances. After all, humans are two-faced and petty. They will strike at their masters whenever they see fit."

"Wellâ€¦ this makes an interesting turn of things," Shiranui commented. "What kind of world would it be, when Satsuma and Choushu become allies one day?"

"A world where only fire and war exists," Amagiri said. "A world that our people long to avoid."

No matter their motives, Kazama and Amagiri were there to ensure that the war that the humans had waged upon one another did not reach their people. They were there to keep the fire away from their families. No matter how they were used by the humans, no matter what stratagems the humans used against one another, that was their guiding force.

"Isn't that ironic?" Shiranui observed. "The two of you plunge yourselves into fire and war, as you said, under the beck and call of the humans for the good of our peopleâ€¦ I guess I'll have to show a little more effort in my days spent here then."

Kazama harrumphed. "So what are you going to do?" he asked Shiranui. "Join the Kiheitai and act as their shield?"

"I'm not _that_ stupid, Kazama!" Shiranui retorted. "But, I'll think of something else. Perhaps, I should be of better use to Choushu and Senya-dono as well!" With those words, he left the company of his compatriots.

"He does not bear the burdens that you do, but his heart is in a good place," Amagiri told Kazama as they watched Shiranui casually walk away from them. Although Amagiri was his right-hand and confidante, Shiranui would also prove invaluable to Kazama in more ways than one, all of them on his terms alone.

"Hmph, I would give credit to his honored uncle for finally being able to knock sense into his skull," Kazama replied. "We are in for

dangerous times, Amagiri. We would need to watch our backs if we are to survive."

Amagiri grunted in approval. "Come, it is late, we are expected back at the Satsuma headquarters."

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><p>It would be another six months Kazama and Amagiri would receive any news besides their duties of being the protectors of the Satsuma-han. Yase Senya, the Princess of the Oni was killed in an altercation in the North, and word had only come to Kyoto a week after. Sen-hime had been inconsolable for days.<p>

"The Oni Council has decreed that Yase Sen to be installed immediately as the new Yase-hime," the representative from the Yase clan, a kindly female Oni, said to Kazama, Amagiri and Shiranui, who were gathered in the Sumiya. "We already have a majority vote, Kazama-san, so please excuse our omission of yours in your absence."

Kazama nodded without an ounce of enmity. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and he did not wish to forestall anything that would impede upon the restoration of the stability in their people's government. He only had one question. "How did Senya-dono leave this world?"

"She fellâ€| protecting our kinsmen in the north," the representative said, "The humans and Oni in Ezo were at first neutral towards the coming conflict, but somehow, the Bakufu sent its agents up north and demanded that they show their loyalty. No one dared to say anything, save for Senya-sama. Both humankind and Oni rallied behind her, and a battle started butâ€| she fell protecting the human leader."

A loud cry could be heard from Sen-hime's private quarters. "What did the humans in Ezo do?" Amagiri asked further. Senya had often focused her energies upon wooing the humans in the North to work with their people of late, and her death could have been a great catalyst for the relations amongst both species to either improve or deteriorateâ€| If things in Ezo went for the worst, the Oni Council might even want to put their energies into the north instead of Kyotoâ€|

Luckily, the representative had good news. "They honored Senya-sama," she answered. "They embalmed her body as best they could, and sent her back to Yase immediately, with a full honor-guard from Hakodate via the sea-route. We could not ask forâ€| better kindness from the humans in these dark times."

"She'll be greatly missed," Kazama said, leaning against one of the Sumiya's many balconies. Within ten years, Kazama had lost another friend due to the folly of humans. To put salt to wound, both Senya and Yukimura Chizo had aided him much throughout his youth, and now, the both of them were gone.

At this point of time, he could not feel anything. There was no grief, no anger. There was only numbness. A thought that could not be erased. Sooner or later, all the Oni would be betrayed by the humans. It only added to his resolve that his clan should be moved further away from the humans, to be hidden where they would be safe from

those primitive beasts.

The Sumiya would be closed for business that night. It alone remained unlit amidst the thousand lanterns of Shimabara. All of the Oni present in Kyoto (with the exception of Yukimura Koudou, who was still missing) gathered at the Yase village, situated within the vicinity of the Imperial Palace, to witness the funeral and to pay their last respects to their fallen Princess.

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><p>"There, there little Chikage, you should cry all you want now that you're alone," Senya told Chikage at his father's funeral, when he had been hidden away from all the well-wishers, distant relatives and of course, clan elders from each clan of the Oni Council. His grandmother had sent him into the inner sanctums of the Kazama manor, so that he could have a moment's peace.

"_Yes, but just this once!" Yukimura Chizo added, approaching the two of them with a wide smile despite the somber mood. "You'll have to grow up fast to become a real man and protect your family, Chikage."

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_Having their encouragement, ten year-old Chikage could no longer hold back his tears. His father had been strict, but his father loved him dearly, and he could not believe that he had just gone like that. At that moment in time, he had felt so lonelyâ€| so coldâ€| as if there was no longer anyone in the world that could stand by him.

—

There, in the embrace of Princess of the Oni, and also that of Yukimura Chizo's, Chikage cried until his eyes ran dry. Even young Amagiri Kyuuju, who had been Chikage's playmate ever since he could remember, felt a stab of pain at the passing of Chikage's father, who had been a mentor to him. With a slight nod, from Senya, even Kyuuju joined them, and all four of them formed a little ball of comfort amidst so much suffering. Shiranui Kyo was only an infant at the time, and was still in his mother's arms, so he was not included in this memory, although he would enter many shared ones as he got older.

"_There, do you feel better?" Senya asked Chikage, who nodded furiously, still clinging onto her. "Always remember, Chikage, when you're alone in the world, you'll always have us around to help you."_

* * *

><p>Although he had been subservient to Senya due to her hereditary claims over the Oni, he had never once seen her to be aloof and unkind. Before her mother decided that it was time to pass on the mantle of leadership to her, Senya would drop by Kagoshima every few months to check on him, and so did Yukimura Chizo. There had been a great sense of camaraderie between them, and although none of them had ever put the feelings of their friendship into words, they had thought their bond to be unbreakable. Chizo even thought at one point, that they could be made even closer together as in-lawsâ€|<p>

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><p>"What's wrong, Chikage, does my little Chizuru displease you?" Chizo asked Kazama when they were finally alone in the Yukimura village. Both Kaoru and Chizuru had been put to bed by Chizo's beautiful wife, Natsuko, leaving the two friends some privacy from their families.

"_Sheâ€| seems to be very much your daughter, Yukimura," Kazama replied, finding no other words to describe the five year-old girl that was to be his wife. If he knew Chizo well enough, he would hazard a guess that young Chizuru would grow up to be a woman of strong will and free spirit, just like his friend. _

Chizo chuckled at his words. "You know, you're a pretty nice person if you would just give up your act of being an arrogant bastard. You'd scare my daughter away when she's old enough to be wooed by you and all my efforts would be wasted."

"_Why _are_ you so sure that this betrothal will come to fruition at all?" Kazama asked Chizo for the umpteenth time, but Chizo did not reply. He only flashed that ever-infuriating, confident smile at him, and asked him to trust him. _

"_Besides, when I'm gone, I'd like to know that there's someone that will ensure that little Kazama Chikage does not feel too lonelyâ€|" He would never understand the true nature of Chizo's self-deprecating jokes, but looking back, he seemed to have known that he would not have long to live, and was entrusting his daughter to him, and him to little Chizuruâ€|_

* * *

><p>Kazama was sure that it was Senya's sudden passing that unfurled so many memories of the past. It made him remember how important it was to him, at the time, to know that despite all his losses, that there at least those who cared for him enough to comfort him. Looking at the new princess of the Yase clan, he knew that it was up to him to help her in her grief, as Senya and Chizou had once done for him.<p>

"Sen-hime," Kazama said to Senya's grieving daughter, in a tone of voice she had never expected to hear. He even offered her a handkerchief to wipe away her tears. "You do not need to put up any sort of mask here. You are amongst friends." The girl's eyes were still red from all the crying that she had done, but when she looked up at Kazama at utter disbelief, he continued, "When my father passed on, your honored mother said the same words to me. They were a greatâ€| comfort at that time."

Sixteen years old and already the ruler of the Oniâ€| It was a charge that no one should have had to bear. Sen-hime thanked him, and continued to whimper for a few moments. "I know what I must do," she said, slowly becoming calmer. "You were right, Kazama, to endeavor to conceal your family from the humansâ€| but we must also know which humans are our allies, or our people would not survive the coming stormâ€|"

"Pick your friends and enemies wisely," Kazama instructed her, doing the same to her as Senya had taught him. He was not willing to risk any of his people to be placed under the mercy of humans, but just

like Senya, Sen-hime still believed that peace, or at least an armistice, could be applied between humans and Oni. "But if you are anything like Senya-dono, you will be alright." He had once commended her for her brilliance in using the Sumiya as a point of information collection for the Oni clans from the Bakufu agents who seemed to favor the establishment, and he had meant those words whole-heartedly. She would have his full support as the Princess of the Oni if she could keep up the good work.

Sen-hime was shocked by the kindness of Kazama's words. "Thank you!" she uttered, her voice containing a mix of gratefulness and also confusion. She was not used to being spoken to in that manner by Kazama, and somehow she knew, that such a chance would not be repeated in the future at all. At least, she could finally understand why her late mother put so much trust in him, and decided that she would too.

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><p>HAN: At first, I would have wanted to jump right into the plot of Hakuouki and start the Ikedaya Incident at this chapter itself, but I realized a few fatal mistakes. Firstly, I had started Kazama and Amagiri's presence about a year too early, which is a terrible miscalculation at my end and I apologize for it. However, the story of Hakuouki takes place in the span of five years, so even in the plot the time would have skipped a few seasons here and there. Secondly, I had completely forgotten that Sen-hime *was* THE Yase-hime at the time of Hakuouki. That means that Senya, whom I had placed as Sen-hime's predecessor had to be removed. It was an easy move for me, but it would be a difficult blow to poor, poor Kazama. If he seems a little OOC, please do revisit his route and his Sekkaroku OVA episode, where I derived much of his characterization and tonality from. As for Sen-hime and her stance on Kazama trying to woo Chizuru in the future, let us say that the girl would still be rather... unsettled about Kazama's methods for now.

AnnaChan310: Perhaps the coming chapters would give me a greater opportunity to discuss his motives, heh heh!

CloudCarnivore: That ending was just the most frustratingly beautiful one I've ever seen in an anime. Of course, we all know that Hijikata didn't die because he has his romantic little epilogue in the main Hakuouki game, and that it was HINTED that she was pregnant with his child in his ending in the Reimeiroku game.

14. The Meeting

Do you know that there is a great beauty from Choushu?" Saigo Takamori asked Kazama as they walked towards the designated meeting-place that Sakamaoto Ryouma had chosen. "His hair and eyes are turquoise in color, tall like a gaijin!"

Kazama sighed out of boredom. "You're talking about Katsura Kogoro," he interrupted. "First among the prodigies of Yoshida Shoin's school, he is the leader of the Choushu-han's political and strategic arm here in the capital." He would be a fool not to know who Katsura Kogoro is before even setting foot into Kyoto, and he had already been in the capital for a year already. It was also said that Katsura was a man who preferred to enter the arena only when he had full

confidence of victory. Yet, Kazama had heard of rumors that he was the least bloodthirsty military leader contending for the fate of Japan. He would have to see for himself what kind of man Katsura was.

As Kazama had predicted (from Shiranui's observations as well), Katsura received his guests at the Tantora. Dressed in a dark navy haori and yellow gi he exuded an air of simple elegance. However, the katana and wakizashi that he wore suggested he was not just a mere politician and scholar. He was a powerful combatant as well. "Saigo Takamori, we finally meet in these troubled times," Katsura greeted Saigo first with an utmost polite bow. His voice was smooth, and his person exuded an air of grace that only made him seem more... beautiful and elegant, if such a thing was possible in a non-effeminate male. He then turned his attention to Kazama and smiled. "Kazama Chikage, your renown as a warrior has definitely exceeded the ranks of Satsuma."

Finding no reason to antagonize Katsura per his usual manner, Kazama only nodded in thanks of his words. Taking a step backwards to allow some privacy for Katsura and Saigo to talk, he crossed his arms and started observing the conversation that was to come.

"There has been rumor that your domain have taken an interest with an alliance," Katsura said to Saigo. "Are our domains not bitter rivals?"

Saigo took a sip of tea that was served to him. "So says the man who invites us to this restaurant," he returned tersely. "Tell me, Katsura, what interests do you have upon our domain?"

Katsura chuckled at Saigo's reply. "Let us see, shall we?" he said, unfolding a piece of paper that he had kept in his sleeve. "We'll need oranges, those large daikon radishes you have, sugar, sweet potatoes" Kazama could not help but realize that his family owned plantations to the foods that Katsura had mentioned and more. However, it was no mere grocery list. It meant that Choushu lacked food. The Mori clan, the rulers of Choushu had pursued the "three whites" of salt, rice and paper to such an extent that they had no ready supply of other products. It had granted great wealth and power to the domain, but now, it could not feed its own soldiers. "Since Satsuma is such a plentiful domain, I would think that this would not be a problem for you, no?"

Saigo furrowed his brows. He knew that Katsura was still skirting the issue. As Amagiri and Kazama had reported to him, the Choushu clan's forces were still lacking in numbers. Already their Kiheitai was recruiting not only disgruntled farmers and workmen, but also artists, ronin and the like, much like the Shinsen-Gumi, and still, they could not find greater numbers to become a force truly terrible to be reckoned with.

However, Satsuma was not all-able as well. For all the food that she had grown, for all the able warriors she had, they lacked the training and the means to fight. In the world of cannons and guns, where the age of the sword, spear and arrow was all but gone, Satsuma only had the ability to purchase the weapons and not operate them. Kazama rolled his eyes, realizing that the humans were playing the game of politics, seeking to cover their own weaknesses while asking for the strength of others. Such behavior would not be tolerated in

Oni ranks.

"Very well, I will then say that we are interested in having moreâ€| Western friends like the Scottish man that provides your weapons," Saigo replied, uncrossing his arms, looking directly at the beauty that was Katsura Kogoro.

"I am afraid that Glover-san is not for sale at such a price," Katsura returned with a bit of a sigh. "We do not seek to restrict his movements, but his price is only for the highest bidder."

If Kazama had been a lesser individual than he was, he would have had Katsura's tongue. While no one could prove that it was Glover that actually sold the Ochimizu to the Aizu-han, it was known that he was the only Western merchant who had great amounts of it. Shiranui had said that Glover had no qualms as to whom he sold his weapons to, and these words justâ€| infuriated him all the more.

"Then I am afraid that we cannot converse any longer," Saigo said bluntly, moving to rise from his seat. "We thank you for being such gracious hosts." Kazama wordlessly delivered a parting bow to Katsura as the youth did the same to Saigo. The conversation did not end because they were unable to reach an agreement. It ended because they knew what they had needed to know, and they would return to their own masters to rethink the situation they were in. The interests between Choushu and Satsuma had already been planted, and they roughly knew what the other needed from them. All they had needed, was an event, a catalyst that should jump-start the possibility of such an alliance, so as to take all their enemies by surprise.

Katsura nodded, replicating Kazama's gesture. "Ah, it would be my honor," he replied. "I hope that we would have the good fortunes to be of like mind in the future." He kept his silence as Saigo exited the room, but just as Kazama was about to leave, he added, "It heartens me to see that the greats of your race so actively involved in deciding the fate of our nation, Kazama Chikage."

Kazama stopped in his tracks and turned towards Katsura. There was no doubt then and there that Katsura knew of his existence, because there had been no secret in Hagi that the Shiranui clan were not truly human. Besides, to the humans of Satsuma, his family was one of great importance in terms of agricultural trade. One only needed to understand the workings of the Shiranui clan to come to conclusion to his identity. "I am only involved with Satsuma because the Shimazu daimyo gave my family land and protection and the debt must be repaid. My race does not desire to be involved in the useless conflict between you humans at all," he told Katsura plainly. There was no need to skirt around the point, not when Katsura had revealed that he was not ignorant of the Oni's participation in the current mess that was Japanese politics.

"Iâ€| suspected as much," Katsura replied. "Myâ€| colleague, Takasugi Shinsaku speaks highly of a member of your race. Perhaps you would know him?"

"I do," Kazama answered, and left the room with Saigo.

The encounter with Katsura Kogoro gave the leaders of the Satsuma-han one conclusion: that Choushu would only enter an alliance if it needs a partner. Tosa was one of its ready allies, but only because Tosa

was too small to defend itself against anything. As of now, their interests were aligned, but they could not be revealed as of yet. While on the surface, Choushu seemed to increase in her defiance to the Bakufu, that her people seemed united towards this one cause, it was only an image when one really understood Choushu as she currently was. Choushu herself was torn into several parts: those that wanted the foreigners out of Japan, those that wanted to work with said foreigners to modernize Japan and also the minority that want to join both the Bakufu and the Emperor's court into one entity. Although Katsura Kogoro had been their leader, he himself could not control the divide of opinions and ideals amongst those of his own domain. Katsura was of the second opinion, as was much of his inner circle, and luckily for him, they formed the largest contingent in the Choushu-han.

With all the apparent genius and gentleness that was Katsura Kogoro, somehow Kazama noticed that there was a shadow within him that could not be seen at first glance. Although it was useless to even instigate that those of the Satsuma-han were of sure honor, somehow he sensed that even Katsura would resort to desperate measures if pushed too far. His knowledge of the Oni, his willingness to deal with the strange Oni from the West in the matters of Choushu's armament and his confidence in holding secret talks with the chief of his domain's greatest rival only but sealed his suspicions of the man, but then again, compared to the evils that humans have created, Katsura was not the worst by far.

"What do you think, Kazama?" Saigo asked Kazama on their return journey. "You had met with Hisamitsu-sama, and he had revealed some of his designs now that we are moving towards them, what are your thoughts?"

"You humans would betray one another for the sake of war and gold... neither you nor Katsura have proven me wrong this day," he answered haughtily. "However, I can see that the only way for Choushu to trust Satsuma, would be to provide them aid when they need it the most."

Saigo raised an eyebrow at Kazama. "Elaborate," he requested, knowing full well that Kazama would only meet strength with strength.

"Choushu are now enemies of the Bakufu, and are now unwelcome in court. However, everywhere you go in the capital, they have the support of the people, that is why they can remain in Kyoto, and retain their prideful existence here. When they find themselves surrounded by their enemies, so much so that the only way forward for them is to retreat back to their own lands, then they will accept an alliance no matter what we give them," Kazama answered. "It is only then when Satsuma can gain the military training and the rice of Choushu, and of course, the backing of foreign nations to legitimize the claims of your cause."

It could not be said that Saigo had totally not given Kazama's words a thought before he mentioned them. What had shocked him was that this isolationist, haughty, impatient Oni could even have some grasp of the intricacies of human politics, even taking foreign involvement into consideration. "You are a man of many talents, Kazama," Saigo commented, knowing that he would not be able to hide his slight admiration in Kazama's abilities.

"When one is in a position like mine, one has to know what I know," Kazama answered plainly. "I will not waste your time, Saigo. Tell me your orders and I will deliver."

"Very well then," Saigo replied. "You and Amagiri shall keep watch on the Choushu-han. Let nothing go amiss."

"As you wish," Kazama said, and without a sound, disappeared from Saigo's company, leaving him to once again ponder upon the nature of his strange subordinate.

* * *

><p>5 June 1864<p>

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><p>The beginning of summer marked a strange turn of events. In the morning, whilst the Shinsen-Gumi were making their rounds in Kyoto city as per usual, the page-boy of the Fukuchou, Hijikata Toshizou, had unwittingly entered the Masuya, where the Choushu-han had hidden most of their weapons. The proprietor of the shop, Furutaka, was captured by the Shinsen-Gumi's First Division, and brought back to their headquarters, where they tortured him for all the information he had. Rumor had it that Hijikata had driven nails down Furutaka's calves and dripped hot candle-wax into the holes that the nails had created, but Kazama and Amagiri knew better than to accept rumor as fact, particularly when no one had seen Furutaka as of yet.<p>

Instantly, there was a great uproar in all of Kyoto. Spies from each faction came out to play, and of course, those of the Satsuma-han jumped into the fore as well. Knowing that the Choushu-han would want to throw the Bakufu agents into confusion, and decided to stick with the venue they had designated for their meeting, convened to decide their next move now that their weapons cache had been discovered by the Shinsen-Gumi. Anyone who wanted to pursue Choushu was now faced with two choices, the Ikedaya or the Shikokuya, both famous inns in Kyoto, but were of some distance to one another. If Furutaka had revealed that they were to meet at the Ikedaya, the first instinct of the Bakufu would be to surround them at the Shikokuya, because no fool would ever want to enter a space that their enemies might be watching.

It was in the afternoon that Kazama and Amagiri entered the Ikedaya, carrying a substantial amount of gold to silence the proprietor regarding their arrival. The presence of Shiranui Kyo there confirmed that their guess was right. Without saying a word to Shiranui after acknowledging his presence they entered the room next to his. As per usual, Kazama leaned against the window-sill, and Amagiri sat closest to the adjacent wall, so as to hear everything the men of the Choushu-han would say in the course of the day.

"Let us hope that their ploy for diversion actually works," Kazama noted as the sun began to set. The inn had already started to turn away potential customers that they did not want to welcome, a sure sign that they were expecting a very, very particular clientele as the time of the meeting drew near.

"I have a feeling that a lot of blood would be shed this night," Amagiri sighed. There had been talk by the Choushu-han members on the other side of the wall that they should storm through the Shinsen-Gumi headquarters and retrieve Furutaka and their lost weapons, while others that wanted to go on with their plans to set fire to Kyoto city as a diversion to kidnap the Emperorâ€¦

Kazama harrumphed, somehow wishing that he had his pipe with him. He was so bored of hearing the useless humans rabble amongst themselves regarding their next course of action that he wanted somethingâ€¦ anything to stimulate his brain. "The truth of the matter is that Choushu cannot decide what to do nextâ€¦ be they sonno-joi proponents or those who purely want to destroy the Bakufu in the name of reformâ€¦ If what they get is a massacre, it would be a boon to them in blessing."

"Your observations might be correct," Amagiri said. He was used to Kazama spouting such words, because they were only a testament that he was a succinct observer of the world, and was unwilling to go through needlesslyâ€¦ softening of reality to get to the point. "But even you cannot predict what faction amongst Choushu will gain victory."

Before Kazama could even attempt to say anything in reply, Shiranui came into their room. "It's started," he said. "The Shinsen-Gumi are at the door." There was nothing readable on his face, but he did reveal one thingâ€¦ "Neither Katsura nor Takasugi are here. They've either been tipped off, or they refused to come tonight."

"That is good news to hear," Amagiri replied. "What would you do now, Shiranui?"

"Well, I'm to help these poor bastards escape, somehow or other," Shiranui replied. "Perhaps we could make them run through the backâ€¦ If there isn't anything else, I think I'll leave first."

Kazama did not make any indication that he should remain, but instead noticed a coming gust of Ki that he could only classify as deadly. He nodded towards Shiranui, and turned his attentions towards two of the Shinsen-Gumi enter their line of vision. One of them had long, flowing hair and seemed the youngest of the pair, his teal eyes keen in the dark of the night. The other, a strongly-built boy with a sharp presence, his eyes green like emeralds. Both of them were wearing the famed asagihiro haori of the Shinsen-Gumi, but had a differentâ€¦ countenance than the rabble they found on the streets.

"Stop. We have no reason to fight," Amagiri said, attempting to diffuse the situation. On the surface, Satsuma was allied with Aizu, and the Shinsen-Gumi served under the latter. They had no need for violence between themâ€¦ currently. "If you are willing to lower your katana, then we will spare your lives."

The boy with the long hair replied, "Haa? The last I saw, we don't let anyone from Choushu go."

"We are not from Choushu," Amagiri replied calmly, holding one hand up to signify his desire for peace, no matter how unwilling the boys seemed to secede to his request.

"Then you should tell me who you are and where you come from!" It was a needless sentence, because the boy thrust his katana towards Amagiri's hand, thinking that he would hit its mark. Amagiri only held the tip of the katana in his hand, drew it back ever so slightly to pull its owner into striking range, and punched the boy squarely in the head, breaking his hachigane and sending him flying across the hallway. Needless to say, Amagiri had acquired his target.

The other boy grinned. It was a grin that exuded confidence amongst chaos and danger. But Kazama only walked towards his opponent silently. "You look like you have a few skills," the other boy said. Gunshots could be heard outside, which meant that at that point, even Shiranui was engaged in combat. The boy attacked first, swiping his katana left and right, and eventually managed to corner his opponent.

"You are indeed brave to face me with yours," Kazama replied, unsheathing his katana.

The boy was not intimidated at all. "Forgive me, but none of our enemies can live," he added, with that infernal smile still upon his face. Another forward thrust followed, but was parried by Kazama. The boy was strong and fast, and was relentless. If Kazama were a humbler man, he would have noted that there was a slight chance that the boy's form was a touch more refined than his. Such qualities belonged to a warrior who was previously undefeated, but it was for this reason that he was overconfident, attacking more than he should have defended himself. It was a weakness that Kazama decided to exploit. Upon the boy's next thrust, he let his katana slip beneath his armpit and the boy smiled wider, thinking that he had won. One kick squarely into the chest made sure that the boy knew who the true victor was.

It was as if that one kick had utterly transformed the boy. Kazama did not care less about it, and turned to leave, but he noticed that the boy had started to cough blood. He must have been afflicted with some serious malady before crossing swords with him. "Wait! I still can fight!" the boy exclaimed, his words nothing more than a plead for Kazama's attention.

"Do you wish to be killed?" Kazama asked, turning back towards the boy. Holding his katana in a high-guard, he was about to hack the boy into pieces. He would have succeeded if not for the appearance of a boy that shielded his body around that of his opponent's.

"Okita-san!" the boy cried. So the fool who dared challenge him was Okita Souji, the Captain of the Shinsengumi's First Division. Things were interesting indeed. He looked at the other fool who thought to protect Okita, but realized that he was not a boy but a girl. In fact, she was the very girl that he had seen in Osaka. His blade had cut her cheek, and it bled profusely, but she seemed to care more for Okita, who was now wheezing and panting.

"Move," Kazama frowned. Although her actions were admirable, it did not make do to stop him from having his prey. He would have to deal with her in the same manner later. But there was something about her eyes. He had known those eyes, long before he saw them in Osaka, and the ones that he had seen that were so similar to hers belonged to a friend long-gone from this earth.

The girl refused to move. "I will not!" she replied. In her desire to protect the foolish boy, her eyes started to glow amber, and the cut on her cheek began to heal. He was right, the girl had Oni blood in her.

"You are of my kind," he said, but it felt that he needed more evidence to actually prove that she was Chizo's daughter, Chizuru. "No! you don't know what you are!" With those words, he engaged his Ki in a different manner, and surrounded himself and the girl in a vortex of many-colored lights. Both their eyes became amber in color, and her hair started to turn white as did his! She was shocked beyond belief.

Suddenly, the boy stood and pushed her behind him. "I would appreciate if you didn't touch her," he growled. The girl protested, but he was adamant. Clearly, wolves would always act as wolves.

"How foolish of you," Kazama jeered. "You cannot even act as her shield, what hopes have you in protecting a girl such as her?" Having said thus, he sheathed his katana and turned to leave. The boy wanted to continue the fight, but he saw no more cause in fighting him anymore. "My work here ended the moment you and yours entered this inn. I will place her under your care! momentarily." Chizuru or no, an Oni girl should not be left in the presence of humans for too long. She should be with her own kind, where she could be protected from all the harm they could create. However, he had neither the time nor means to accommodate her, so he would have to rely on those pesky humans for once.

"Wait! I can still fight!"

Kazama did not even look at the boy, and disappeared into the night. The fighting downstairs had ceased, and he had no desire to be discovered by more of the Shinsen-Gumi. He would have to look for the girl at another date. But now that he knew that she was affiliated with the Shinsen-Gumi, seeking her out would be all the easier.

* * *

><p>HAN: Chizuru and Kazama finally meet, yay! The Ikedaya scene was in fact a juxtaposition of that of the anime and Kyoto Ranbu because I felt that it was important that Kazama realized that Chizuru was an Oni in a more... intimate setting as opposed to the Kinmon No Hen. Besides, he had already "seen" her in Osaka before in this fic, he would be able to recognize her. Of course, we would need to wait until they meet again at the Nijio Castle for him to see her bearing the Yukimura family's wakizashikodachi, Shoutsuuren. If you guys are wondering about how I am going to handle Katsura, I would like to see him as a side character that pops up fairly often because of his involvement in The Quest. His characterization is also leaned towards that of his in Bakumatsu Musouroku as opposed to Urakata Hakuouki, because he has to be seen as some sort of enemy to the Shinsen-Gumi as of yet.

CloudCarnivore: Please do enjoy them as much as I did! Do tell me how you like this chapter, though!

"_Otou-samaâ€| Chikage Onii-sama looks very scaryâ€|" _

_If the child who said those impertinent words had been a human, he would have most likely given her a well-deserved fist to her head to put her back in line. However, she was more than just an ordinary human girl-child. She was Chizuru, the daughter of Yukimura Chizo, the Ojou-sama and most definitely the future co-matriarch of the Yukimura clan, and as of that afternoon, his betrothed. _

_He had forgotten what Chizo said to him to warrant a scowl upon his part, but when she said those words, he could not but feel a littleâ€| self-conscious of his inability to act like a well-functioning grown-up in front of her, even if her own father had been an immature bastard at times. _

"_Come now, Chikage, the words of children mean no evil," Chizo added, putting a hand on his daughter's shoulder as he regarded his future son-in-law. Of course, he had laughed hysterically at what Chizuru had said, but Kazama knew that he would have to let it slide. He would have not have become the Oni leader he was without Chizo, and that alone was enough to garner restraint on his part._

* * *

><p>"Kazamaâ€| are you listening to me?" Amagiri's voice cut through Kazama's mind, bringing him back to the present.<p>

Kazama blinked and refocused his attention upon Amagiri. "Yes, I'm listening," he said, and let out a long breath of smoke on his pipe.

"I was asking you if you were sure that the girl you saw at the Ikedaya is Chizo-san's daughter," Amagiri replied, clearly losing a tiny hint of his patience. Amagiri was not a man to grumble on the faults of others, but he too had his own limits and Kazama knew well to skirt around them carefully.

"She has his eyes," Kazama answered. It was the first thing that struck him. The girl's eyes was just like Chizo's, although she held much promise to her mother's famous Suzumori beauty. Those honey-colored eyes could have brought many men to heel if she had not been wearing men's clothes.

"Hmmmâ€|" Amagiri sounded, recalling well how large and round the girl's had been when she was but a child. Of course, he was there at the betrothal ceremony of Kazama and Chizuru, and he remembered well how she and her twin, Kaoru had stolen the attentions of all those who attended because they were so adorable. "What is your next course of action?"

"We must first see for ourselves if the wakizashi that she has with her truly is Yukimura's Shoutsuuren," Kazama said. He did not want to waste his time upon false leadâ€| or false hope. "However, even if she was a common Oni girl, we have a responsibility to bring her to the daughter of the Yase clan."

Amagiri rose and walked over to Kazama. "Tell me, Kazama, what happens if she is Chizo-san's daughter. Would you still carry out your betrothal?" he asked. Although the members of the Oni Council

often betrothed their sons and daughters to one another, they were highly flexible, and could be called off so long they had the blessings of the other party. However, when the Yukimura clan was destroyed, and Yukimura Koudou was thought to be the only survivor, it was understood that he was free to pursue any woman he pleased. But now it was up to him to decide if he wanted to woo the girl or not.

"If she really is the daughter of the Yukimura clan, only she would be fitting to be my wife," Kazama answered plainly. He had made his intentions very clear that he did not wish a union with the Yase clan. They were a matrilineal family, which meant that if he had married Sen-hime, their children's surnames would be Yase and not Kazama. It was more or less due to the fact that the Oni valued girls due to their rarity and also the fact that they were ruling family of the Japanese Oni, and would not secede their dynasty to other clans. If Kazama had not been the leader of his clan, and also that of the Western Oni, he would have considered Sen-hime's hand. Now that there was a possibility that the girl he encountered in the Ikedaya was Yukimura Chizuru, it would make most sense that he would go after her hand instead.

"And when will you approach the Shinsen-Gumi to ask to meet her?" Amagiri inquired further. Satsuma and Aizu were now allies, and the marriage between a ward of the Shinsen-Gumi, officially the page-boy of their Fukuchou and that of Kazama, somewhat of an important lieutenant amongst the ranks of the Satsuma-han, which would make an interesting match for those in the ranks of the Bakufu. In the world of the Oni, it would also mean that the Yukimura clan would be restored into the Oni Council and that the Kazama clan would gain a highly illustrious daughter in-law, solidifying its status as the chief Oni clan in the West.

Kazama harrumphed. "When the time is ripe," he replied. "Now that the Choushu-han is forced into a corner, they will lash out like the wounded beast it is. The Bakufu's hands will be full these days."

* * *

><p>20 August 1864<p>

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><p>Dawn was fast approaching, and the survivors of the Choushu-han had already made their decision, having regrouped and reorganized themselves since the Ikedaya Incident. Their goal was no longer to free their captive members, but to launch a retaliation against the Bakufu. With Katsura Kogoro and his inner circle either nowhere to be found, or were reluctant to participate in such a drastic measure, the radicals of the Choushu-han were left with only one route: they had to go through with their plans to burn down the city in order to escape the eyes of the Bakufu and make their way back to the lands of their domain.<p>

Knowing this, Aizu and Satsuma sent their troops to guard the Imperial Palace, in hopes to stop Choushu's efforts from kidnapping the Emperor. However, it no longer seemed to be their goal. In fact, Kusaka Genzui, knowing that Katsura had already approached Saigo Takamori, had appeared at the doorstep of the Satsuma-han's holdings in Kyoto, smiling serenely, asking for an escort for his companions

and himself so that they could travel to Mount Tennou, where they could commit seppuku undisturbed.

"Choushu has failed in uniting itself, and our cause is now broken," Kusaka explained to Saigo. "I have failed my honored teacher's memory, and I will repay it with death." Once again, his words proved that the men of the Choushu-han liked to speak in circles. Knowing that the Bakufu would stop at nothing to gather all the members of the Choushu-han and execute them one by one, Kusaka knew that the best way would be to avert their eyes far away from the likes of Katsura Kogoro, Itou Hirobumi and of course, Takasugi Shinsaku. They were the moderates of the Choushu-han, and it would be they and their seemingly cool heads that would be able to lead their domain into victory in the future.

"I will be your guard," Kazama spoke suddenly, causing both Kusaka and Saigo to turn towards him in utter surprise. "Your intentions are pure, and admirable. Besides, I was the only one present when your chieftain met with mine. No one else alive can know what happened then."

Out of gratitude, Kusaka knelt before Kazama and prostrated his thanks towards the Oni leader. "I will never forget your kindness, Kazama-dono," he said as he rose. It was one of those moments when Kazama felt no need to explain himself, but it made it clear to those around him that although Kazama could not stand evils like corruption, reckless hatred and common idiocy, he would never turn his back on those that were honorable, even in defeat or utter hopelessness.

"Gather your men," Kazama replied. "You should leave for Mount Tennou now if you are to succeed in your mission." As he turned to leave, an idea struck him. In the current state of affairs, he could not be seen being on civil terms with anyone from the Choushu-han, let alone one of Katsura Kogoro's most trusted advisors. "Saigo, we'll need some of our uniforms for Kusaka and his men. It will look less conspicuous if I were to escort them to their destination without suspicion."

Saigo nodded Kazama's quick thinking, and hollered for ten uniforms to be brought to him immediately. Kusaka and his men quickly changed into them and followed Kazama as they walked towards Mount Tennou. "May you find the resolution that you are looking for," Saigo wished Kusaka, and saw them on their way.

"You are a greatly valued asset to Satsuma, Kazama-dono," Kusaka observed, trying to stir some form of conversation with Kazama as they walked towards Mount Tennou. The chaos had already started, as the sound of cannon-fire could be heard. If he had not guessed right, Choushu's forces had tried to break through the Hamaguri Gate. Doubtless, they would be faced with Aizu and Satsuma's men, both highly determined to chase them away from the Imperial Palace, and to extent, away from the capital. Another team would then charge the Kuge Gate, in hopes to break the vanguard of the joined Aizu and Satsuma forces.

"Satsuma knows that it has to get its hands on any able man they have in order to win this war," Kazama replied. "Until that happens, everyone is dispensable." He had spoken the cold truth that would have broken the idealistic image of the coming conflict that many

fools embroiled in it would have had. "Since I cannot shirk from the debts to Satsuma accumulated by my ancestors, I have no choice but to join their ranks."

Kusaka gave a faint chuckle. "You humble yourself far too much," he said. "It is most likely that Satsuma has recruited you because you have the skills that those amongst her ranks do not. Skills that are not so evident to the naked eye." Even if this was the only time that Kusaka had met Kazama, but he had already known that this man, Oni or no, was a being of high honor and great magnanimity if he wanted to be. Such a talent was rare amongst both human and Oni races, and was greatly needed in creating a new world order.

Several moments later, they arrived at the foot of Mount Tennou. They would have to cross a bridge to get to the mountain, and there had been a guard posted there. "I carry orders from above, soldier," Kazama told the guard, wearing the uniform of the Aizu-han. "I am to guard this post with the men I bring with me to prevent the rebels from entering the mountain while you are to report to the Hamaguri Gate."

The soldier scratched his head. "There was no one!"

Kazama cut his throat before he could say anything else. "Go now," he told Kusaka as blood started to flow from the dead soldier's neck. "Who knows what other dogs of the Bakufu might follow."

One last time, Kusaka bowed towards the Oni-leader and thanked him. In fact, all of his men did the same, while cannon fire could be heard from the Kuge Gate. It was for certain that those who had attacked the Hamaguri Gate had failed, seeing both Satsuma and Aizu fighting to defend it, and seized the chance to enter the Imperial Palace through the back-passage.

Kazama sighed. Although most humans were foul, petty and obnoxious, there would be those who were worth the stroll between the Hamaguri Gate and Mount Tennou. There was no shadow of doubt that Kusaka was not a Choushu radical, but then again, he himself had entered the fray, knowing that in order for Choushu to emerge as a victor, it must get rid of those who were discordant within the reaches of its own grand design. When Katsura Kogoro, its leader, was a moderate man seeking to abolish the notions of an old Japan that could not breathe under the weight of its own rot, those who confounded his vision, especially those who fought under his banner had to be extinguished. It had been the best way to destroy any opposing factions within their domain, and also to win back the confidence of the souls that were lost in their quest to found a new country from the old. Kusaka's sacrifice was a worthy and needed one, and Kazama would have no qualms in aiding such a gesture.

As the sweltering afternoon sun beat down against the Imperial Palace, he leaned against the railings of the bridge, trying to guess which Bakufu agent would have picked up the scent of the Choushu-han's trail, and follow them right till where he now stood. None of them would have mattered though, because they would not be able to survive him anyways.

Soon, he began to hear the sound of approaching footsteps. As he had expected, the dogs kept by the Bakufu had already noticed that Satsuma had issued no such order for a group of men to guard Mount

Tennou, that they were duped by the Choushu-han. Least surprising of all, was that the ones who came to meet him at the bridge were the members of the Shinsen-Gumi, and not only that, they had brought the Oni girl with them. She was trying her utmost to keep up with them, and managed to stay within the group, which was commendable feat for a sixteen year-old girl without any form of training.

They were led by a man with waist-length raven hair and ferocious amethyst eyes. Another masculine beauty upon the battlefield. Kazama could care less who he was, but there was a good guess that this was the now-infamous Hijikata Toshizou, who bore the moniker of "Oni-Fukuchou" amongst the ranks of the Shinsen-Gumi. If it were up to Kazama, strictness and discipline were not wholly Oni traits, and it was an insult to his people to be used as a comparison towards his chosen style of leadership.

He might as well start something if he did not want to fry under the heat and boredom. "Those haori you are the Shinsen-Gumi," he said, naming them after he had slashed at the arm of one of their members. The asagihiro haori that they wore was apparently forcefully ordered from a tailor in Mibu during the days of Serizawa Kamo, who demanded that they sold fabrics of that print and color only to the Shinsen-Gumi. Although the tailor was no longer coerced into doing business with them, the ranks of the Shinsen-Gumi had grown so much that the color asagihiro, was now associated only with their faction.

The girl quickly went to the aid of his victim, and skillfully bandaged his wound. It had not been life-threatening, but it would have deemed him unable to fight for a certain period of time. In this battlefield, he would be an invalid. There was no doubt that she would recognize him, particularly after he had revealed that she was an Oni at the Ikedaya, just like he was. "He was at the Ikedaya that night," she told the man known as Hijikata.

"What?" Hijikata asked in reply. Soon, the realization sank in. Kazama saw his amethyst eyes change in the manner they gazed upon him. It was clear now that he was not their ally by any means.

"Have you come barging here to seek merit as you have done at the Ikedaya?" Kazama asked Hijikata. He had known for a fact that the Shinsen-Gumi had no real clearance from the Aizu-han to attack the Ikedaya, even if there were Choushu radicals within the inn, convening on how best to save their own from the clutches of those ignorant wolf-pups. The days following the Ikedaya Incident had been tremendously beneficial for the Shinsen-Gumi, particularly when almost half the city could see them initiate the bloodbath by storming into the inn under the supposed orders to the Aizu-han. Now, they would do the same there, just because Aizu and Satsuma had taken up a joined responsibility in guarding the Imperial Palace from the same bunch of trouble-makers. "It would look as if you country-born Samurai are always hungry wait you are not even samurai." Most of the Shinsen-Gumi's members were not born into the samurai clans. When they held swords and were in the service of the Aizu-han, they could be considered to be ronin at their best.

However, Hijikata was not one to meekly accept Kazama's taunts. "Were you the one who displayed his abilities at the Ikedaya?" he replied, meeting Kazama's ruby eyes directly. "Your provocations might be a bit cheap"

"I had heard rumor of a few skilled ronin amongst your ranks, but judging by the way things have unfolded, they might just be merely rumors," Kazama returned, his words swift as they were twisted deep into the hearts of those who heard them. "The one you call Okita, he was quite the incapable swordsman."

There was no doubt that he had angered one of them. "You can speak ill of Souji all you want, but before that, explain to me why you must hurt our man without provocation?" the man demanded, sky-blue eyes stern and angry. "If I disagree to your reasons, I will have you defeated right now!" His words had only managed to prove how much the Shinsen-Gumi resembled a pack of wolves, for better or for worse. While it was admirable for him to show concern to a fellow combatant, it did not change the fact that things would remain the same for now. They were a nothing but a handful of ronin adopted by the Aizu-han and his mission was to ensure that they did not cross the bridge to stop Kusaka and his men from committing seppuku.

"It is for the reason that you are the hounds of the Bakufu who know nothing of honor and dignity, only seeking merit where you can find it," Kazama answered. He rarely showed the workings of his mind to humans, but this time he felt that they must be enlightened or their idiocy would continue. "Can you not see the fruitlessness in chasing down defeated warriors who have withdrawn from the battlefield?" Of course, he could not reveal the fact that Kusaka and his men were there to sacrifice themselves, not to regain their fallen honors in the eyes of a court and system that they no longer believed in, but to buy time for their brothers in arms. "Is it so hard to understand that this is the only place where they can take their own lives in peace?"

It would have seemed that the girl could no longer tolerate what she was hearing from him. "If this was the case, then is it right to kill merely for another man's honor?" she asked him fiercely, causing him to turn his attentions fully to her. It was at that moment when he realized how true his guess had been. That kind of righteous fury that she had within her at that point in time was only seen in Yukimura Chizo before her. The fire in those honey-colored eyes, the strength in her voice—

Kazama harrumphed and returned, "Then, what right does the Shinsen-Gumi have to violate their right to a peaceful end in search for further merit upon the battlefield?" The girl had been unable to respond, but Hijikata was.

"They should not have taken this entire affair so lightly," Hijikata replied. "Those who get involved in a fight for weak and null reasons, turning tail when they see no chance of victory should not deserve the honor of a warrior's death!" Of course, he had spoken those words only because he was from an opposing faction. He would have been singing a different tune if he had been in Kusaka's place. Playing the role of the pursuer, having the backing of the Aizu-han and the Bakufu made the Shinsen-Gumi strong despite their socio-economic statuses, meaning that they had the right of way in all circumstances. "Isn't it unnecessary for rebels who have risen up against the Emperor to seek death by seppuku when decapitation is already enough for criminals?" In short, Hijikata could speak those words, in that tone of voice only because he was on the winning side, without considering how unstable the game itself was.

"So, you are implying that those who fight should just prepare to die?" Kazama asked Hijikata. His clenched the hilt of his katana so tightly until his already-hair knuckles turned white, remembering that Chizo and the Yukimura clan was consumed by battle and fire due to humans as war-like as the Shinsen-Gumi. The irony was that he was fighting so that no such thing would be repeated onto his family, while Chizo had perished because he did not believe in fighting anything or anyone. Despite their long lives, the Oni would never seek death so lightly because they knew the true importance of the gift of life. It was for that sole reason why most the Yukimura clan had been pacifists for generations.

"If you wage a war without resolving to die, then you are a disgrace of a warrior," Hijikata surmised. "If those men truly had the honors deserving of warriors, then they should have met their enemies in glorious battle without reservations." As he said those words, holding Kazama at the point of his katana, the members of the Shinsen-Gumi around him surrounded the Oni, waiting for his next orders. "Idiots, have you forgot your duties?"

The apparent second-in-command of the company then grinned. "Hijikata-san, then let me take command of this unit and move towards Mount Tennou," he said. Hijikata nodded, and thus, he brought the rest of the company towards where Kusaka should be currently. "Chizuru, take care of that guy for me," he pleaded, once again proving that the girl was none other than Chizo's only daughter. Kazama was unable to stop them, and barely missed a horizontal strike from Hijikata.

"Don't you know the meaning of a serious battle?" Hijikata asked Kazama. "I would suppose that you have the resolution to die now, especially since you've injured one of our comrades!"

"You talk as if you have any hope in killing me," Kazama commented, and immediately started his attack. Knowing that the Shinsen-Gumi would always press on when they have the advantage, there was sense to be the one who made the first move. To the casual observer, Kazama would be the one who could have won with strength and prowess alone, but Hijikata was quick-witted and fast. However, when Hijikata delivered a two-handed parry to one of his one-handed strokes from a high guard, Kazama's katana slipped from his hand and started spinning towards the direction of the girl, cutting her arm as it embedded itself into the railing of the bridge.

She started to bleed immediately, and Kazama saw for himself the wound heal as suddenly as she had received it. All he needed now was a clear view of the wakizashi that she wore!

"That is enough, Kazama!" Amagiri's voice interrupted the duel. Pulling the katana from the wood, he threw it back to Kazama by the hilt. "You should know that we of the Satsuma-han have no reason to fight with the Shinsen-Gumi." Of course, the secrets that Kazama had known could not yet be applied upon the battlefield, so Amagiri was right! to a certain extent, as always.

"One would even think that such a fact is inconceivable," Kazama harrumphed, and turned towards the other end of the bridge, walking towards the Hamaguri Gate. He stole a look at the girl and realized that all of his suspicions were true. She was carrying the

Shoutsuuren. The last heir of the Yukimura clan had been found.

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><p>HAN: This chapter was made possible by once again combining the Kinmon No Hen sections of Urakata Hakuouki, where we can only see Kusaka Genzui in flashbacks about going up to Mount Tennou; and also Episode 4 of the anime. I had been wondering many times HOW in the world Kazama had known Chizuru's name when he tried to abduct her at Nijio Castle slightly later into the plot and I decided to answer my own question the best way I know how. Shinpachi actually addresses Chizuru by her name, which should altogether cement the fact of her identity to Kazama.<p>

AnnaChan310: I try my best to make sure that he still sounds like the Kazama we all know and love at all times. Rewatching certain scenes helped wonders, particularly when I need to figure out how Kazama would talk to certain characters.

CloudCarnivore: Heh heh thanks!

16. The Prey

With Kusaka Genzui and his fellow Choushu compatriots having successfully committing seppuku, the rest of the Choushu radicals were able to set fire to the city as the rest of them fled Kyoto. There was no news of any Choushu survivors among the ranks of those who had participated in the rebellious operations at the Imperial Palace, a victory for the Bakufu at the cost of 28000 homes, 1207 homes and 253 places of religion. The incident would be recorded in the annals of history as the Kinmon No Hen, the Great Change at the Forbidden Gates. In the following months, the Bakufu would send its great armies towards Choushu, in hopes of utterly destroying her due to her many rebellious attempts, but the effort was ultimately stopped by the Satsuma-han, who managed to convince a settlement between both parties. It was a movement that further propelled Katsura Kogoro and his inner circle into greater heights of power within the affairs of their own domain. Japanese politics would enter a state of watchful peace following the First Choushu Expedition.

The agents of the Bakufu seemed to be relieved at the respite that they had been given, seeing that Choushu had now left the capital and was supposedly defeated. It would take time to exact proper punishment upon the errant domain, which gave Kazama precious time to decide what he was going to do in the near future. No doubt, he would be pushed into the forefront of the Satsuma-han, due to his actions during the Ikedaya Affair and the Kinmon No Hen. He had proven time and again that he was a most able spy and vanguard. But his duties as a Satsuma combatant no longer interested him. His mind now lay upon the discovery of the lost Yukimura heir, Chizuru, and what she had posed for the future of his kind and to an extension himself.

Kazama sighed, and poured a cup of the best sake he had onto the ground. "Yukimura, I have found your precious daughter. She is now a ward of the Shinsen-Gumi, hiding her feminine self, working as a page-boy for the country-born dogs of the Bakufu. She has been living among the humans for far too long, I expect that she does not know

that who or what she truly is." The Oni liked to have keepsakes of those that had passed on to remember them by. He had used the rose-bush that his late father had tended to when he wanted to "speak" with him, and now, he offered Yukimura Chizo sake, because he loved the stuff more than a doctor should. "If this is your way of showing me my destiny, then you are playing a sick joke. Ten years ago, I agreed to be betrothed to Chizuru because of how you have aided me since I was ten. I will see this promise to the end, whether your daughter agrees with me or not."

In his heart, the debt that he owed Yukimura Chizo was too great to be repaid. True, Amagiri had been his constant companion, but Amagiri would never understand the weight that one bore when one's entire clan was upon his shoulders. For a child, the burden was real. It was heavy and stifling. The fear of failure was real, and the chances of failing were even more concrete, and for a boy who had been betrayed by his own uncle, he could not trust even those within his family. It was Chizo that made him see that he was not defending his family from the darkness of the world, it was him defending himself. The dark days of his growing years was lightened due to the many conversations he had with Chizo, be it stating their opinions on matters related to their position or actual advice for the fledgling clan-leader. Kazama was who he was today because of Chizo.

"You're pathetic, Kazama," Shiranui said, causing Kazama to unsheathe his katana and point it at Shiranui's throat. "Don't worry, I won't breathe a word of this to anyone. Not even Amagiri." Kazama never liked to be disturbed when he wasâ€¦ convening with those that had passed, because it was the only time when he allowed himself to be honest with himself, speaking words carefully chosen to them, as if he would anticipate their reply.

"You'd better," Kazama replied. "Have you been spying on me?"

"That's like saying the many years I spent next to your sorry ass was all for nothing," Shiranui answered bluntly. "You usually retreat to the cemetery when you want to vent your frustration on things out of your control by talking to yourself. Any idiot who knows you would have predicted that. So, the girl you saw, she's really Chizo-san's daughter?"

Kazama nodded. "The one and only Yukimura Chizuru," he said. "Amagiri confirmed it. I've sent a letter back to Kagoshima to inform my grandmother and Kazutarou about it. Your uncle would know soon enough when the Council convenes."

"That would be interesting," Shiranui whistled. "So you have your bride now. Aren't you going toâ€¦ you know, woo her or whatever?" Oni marriages only occurred upon equal terms. Kazama would have to work hard to convince the girl into becoming his wife, or his efforts would be futile.

"I would have to first remove her from the company of those insolent hounds of the Bakufu," Kazama answered. "Surely, a treasure of our people like her would not be able to blossom in suchâ€¦ harsh surroundings."

"How did she end up with the Shinsen-Gumi in the first place?" Shiranui asked.

Kazama shrugged. "I hear that she is now known as the page-boy to the Fukuchou," he said. "At least they have some sense to hide her identity thus." Humans were base, simplistic creatures. If they knew that there was a woman in their midst, living among them, they would not have spared Chizuru. Thus, the girl who had inherited the iron will of the Yukimura clan and the legendary beauty of the daughters of the Suzumori, lived as a boy among the Wolves of Mibu.

"Isn't that an awful waste?" Shiranui commented. "Well, I guess a girl couldn't be seen running around scores of men. It would take an awful amount of discipline, respect and brains not to just grab at her upon sight unless one of the Shinsen-Gumi's commanders marry her."

Without hesitation, Kazama hit Shiranui in the head with his fist. "Ahou. Chizuru will be my wife," he proclaimed.

"Then I don't see why you shouldn't walk through the front door of the Shinsen-Gumi and just ask for her hand," Shiranui said. "Say something like, 'I am Yukimura Chizuru's betrothed and I demand her to be returned to me!' That should sweep her off her feet!"

Kazama hit Shiranui a second time. "Fool. Have you no inkling on what the Tosa-han has been orchestrating lately?" he asked Shiranui. "Katsura Kogoro and Saigo Takamori have interest in creating an alliance between Choushu and Satsuma. When that happens, how can we have our wedding in peace when my bride is from a Sabaku faction and I, from a Toubaku one?"

"These are just useless human political details, aren't they?" Shiranui said, rubbing the two spots that Kazama hit with his palms. "It's not like you'd pay any mind to them!"

"Human politics or no, they would be real to her," Kazama returned. Chizo's daughter would most certainly have not known about a world other than that of the humans. She would be too young to remember anything of her old life in the Yukimura village, too young to remember anything about their betrothal ceremony. It was exactly why she could not remember him at all.

Those words made Shiranui burst out into great peals of laughter, even if it meant more physical abuse from Kazama. "You've barely even met her and you're already so thoughtful! what would happen if you really do start to woo her?"

At those words, Kazama could only pause and think. When one thought of Shiranui's question, truthfully and honestly, he could not come up with an answer. All he knew was that from the moment he looked into those honey-colored eyes, he knew that only she could be his wife. Whether it was for his clan, or to ensure that his promise to Chizo to protect her came to fruition, or as his responsibility as a member of the Oni Council that the Yukimura clan could somehow survive! He had to marry her.

"Ne, Kazama, you've never stopped blaming yourself for what happened to Chizo-san and his family, haven't you?" Shiranui asked. It was a question that no one had asked Kazama before, because it seemed to bring him so much pain. Amagiri had told Shiranui once that Kazama proposed to arm the Yukimura village himself, but Chizo flatly

refused, opting for defensive training from the Kazama train instead.

"I'm already past that kind of regret, Shiranui," Kazama answered. In all truth, he had felt nothing when he had heard that the Yukimura clan was destroyed. He had not been unfeeling, but it was nothingness that crept into his heart when the news reached him. Darkness and fear soon followed that eerily calm reaction of his, fear for his people and his family more than all others. It only managed to increase his resolve to protect all that was his to protect.

This time, Shiranui sighed. "Well then, if you still want to bring the girl into our fold, I'll help you," he said. "No Oni girl should live with humans for too long. It would break her heart when she finds out that she won't grow old and die as quickly as they do." It was his own way of saying that he would help Kazama because he knew that it would be the only thing that would bring him peace. After all, he too had grown up around Chizo and regarded Chizo as a great friend. There would be no harm in him helping Kazama realize Chizo's last wish to see his daughter being placed in Kazama's care, and would be an interesting venture amidst the dreariness of human politics in the capital.

Kazama gave Shiranui a sideways grin. "I would have to thank you then," he said. "Now, let us see what wonders can the wolf-pups of Mibu weave around her."

* * *

><p>When the Bakufu troops involved in the First Choushu Expedition had returned to Kyoto, the Shinsen-Gumi themselves underwent certain change. Satsuma accepted reports that they had recruited the scholar and kenjutsu master, Itou Kashitarou into their fold as their military advisor despite Itou's Sonno-joi leanings. It was also interesting to note that shortly after the arrival of Itou into the Shinsen-Gumi, their greatly beloved General Commander, Sannan Keisuke was killed in a strange accident. There had been no trace of a struggle, nor did the Shinsen-Gumi cite any perpetrators to the Aizu-han, which brought great curiosity to those who had eyes upon the Shinsen-Gumi because there had not been any signs of a burial for Sannan at all.<p>

Nevertheless, Kazama watched the rising stars of the Bakufu's ranks with great interest, as per his duties as a Satsuma spy, and waited with bated breath for the chance to steal Chizuru away from the Shinsen-Gumi. The opportunity came when the Shogun was announced to be arriving in Kyoto. As per usual, he would stay within the Nijio Castle, which was his residence in the capital, and due to their many recent heroic acts in his service, the Shinsen-Gumi were to be his personal guard throughout the entirety of his stay. Given that Chizuru had been of great help to their missions, she would also be participating in such a great boon to the Shinsen-Gumi, and would be responsible for relaying instructions throughout the castle.

Kazama, Amagiri and Shiranui entered the castle at nightfall, when the guards were to be changed. Knowing that the ground-level would be clearly infested by base, country-born ronin, they decided the best way to corner Chizuru would be to free-run to wherever she was, leaping over high walls and vast distances until they found her. Free-running was not an Oni gift, but an Oni skill that enabled them

to clear most if any physical obstacles, given their greater strength and speed compared to that of humans. In any confrontation, it would make them seem as though they were utterly uncatchable.

From their vantage point upon the walls, they watched as the Shinsen-Gumi lined the entry and exit points of the castle. Their full strength was tiny, at about 130 members, but they were a faction that had the most skill in all of those loyal to the Bakufu. Although their prowess were said to be below that of the Oni, but they could be said to be among the best warriors their nation would see at their time. Even the bravest of fools would dare think twice about openly challenging the Shinsen-Gumi, but Kazama was no fool. He desired no open conflict with those country-born pups, and only wanted the girl.

"The next guard would be changed at the hour of the Dog (9 P.M.)," Chizuru announced as she ran through the lines of battlements and gateways of Nijio Castle. Her voice was clear, and doubtless too much of a soprano to ever be considered to belong to that of a teenaged boy. Kazama could not help but wonder whom the commanders of the Shinsen-Gumi were trying to fool by having her masquerade as a boy anyways. "The Third Division is to patrol the central courtyard." The girl was so absorbed by her duties that she almost tripped. Although she did not have the grace and elegance that should have belonged to a scion of a great Oni clan, it could not be blamed because she had grown up amongst a coarse company.

It took her mere moments to realize that Kazama and the others were watching her intently upon the walls. It was quite the impressive act, seeing that they had no intention to be detected at all. "What are you doing here?" she demanded, taking a step backwards and entering a rudimentary battle-stance. Her guard-dogs must have trained her quite well. "How did you get up there?"

Shiranui was the first to reply. "These obstacles made by mere humans are nothing to us, the Oni," he said with a grin. By opening proclaiming themselves to be of her race, he had hoped to jog her memory a little, but it did not seem to help at all. The girl turned towards Shiranui furiously, and demanded that they stop making fun of her.

Her reaction had fully proved Kazama's guesses. She was completely clueless about her heritage and her bloodline. "You really don't know what you are, don't you?" Kazama asked her. "You are one of us, Yukimura Chizuru."

"How do you know my name?" she retorted. She was starting to get frightened, but there were words between them that had to be exchanged. She cannot be forever ignorant about herself, nor can she remain in human company for too long.

"Your wounds heal at an exceptional speed compared to that of the humans," Amagiri suggested as he crept behind her after leaping onto the ground soundlessly. He had seen a cut on her upper arm heal within seconds with his own eyes, during the Kinmon No Hen. There was no mistake that she was one of them.

"If you don't believe it yet, why don't I show you?" Shiranui teased, pointing his pistol towards her. "It'll be easier for you to believe us if we gave you a demonstration."

Kazama took his cue, and stopped Shiranui from actually firing upon her. "Whether you believe us or not, that is the truth of your existence, and it would not change," he told the girl. "Your bear the surname of the most powerful clan of the eastern Oni, and the wakizashi of your house. That is proof enough for us." He could see her tightening her hold upon the hilt of her wakizashi. She was willing to defend herself against them, but it would be a fruitless measure. Thus, he jumped from the walls and landed just in front of her. "We do not need your consent to take you away with us, but" he outstretched his hand to her and continued sternly, "Female Oni are valuable, so you should come with us."

Chizuru did not refuse him. She had been too afraid of him to do anything of the sort. She had been too afraid to even move. But as she hesitated, two shadows jumped before her and bared their weapons. A tall man, red of hair with amber eyes (he should have a small hint of Oni blood in him to have received such an eye color, Kazama thought), bearing a spear and one of slighter build, blessed with highly receptive sapphire eyes and purple hair came between Kazama and Chizuru. "Harada-san, Saito-san!" she cried in gratitude, naming the Captains of the Tenth and Third Divisions of the Shinsen-Gumi respectively.

"Oi, trying to bring a woman home with you in this kind of place would reflect badly on your personality," Harada berated. "You should be ashamed of yourselves."

Harrumphing, Kazama replied, "You again" It would seem that country dogs have sharp tongues." He did not appreciate their intrusion at all.

"Those should have been our words," Saito lashed, ready to strike at any time.

A third soon came into view, the beauty known as Hijikata Toshizou, and tapped Chizuru's shoulder. "Hijikata-san!" she greeted. Doubtless, she reveled in their company.

"Stand back," he whispered to her and she did as she was told. "Hmph, I thought that you might have been interested in taking the Shogun's head, but who knew that you would come after a kid like that."

"Neither the Shogun nor you are of our concern now," Kazama exclaimed. "Her coming with us concerns the matters of the Oni."

Hijikata narrowed his eyes, not believing what he had just heard. However, Chizuru cast her eyes down, unable to say anything. "The Oni?" he asked.

"Will you not stand down?" Amagiri asked. "As I have said before at the Hamaguri Gate, we have no reason to fight." If the Shinsen-Gumi would willingly allow Chizuru to leave with them, they would leave them in peace.

However, Saito, like the rest of his compatriots, refused to back down. "However, it would seem that I have reason to fight you." Those sapphire eyes of his were piercingly cold, but they held the spirit

of a warrior that could never diminish. He might have been very young, but his soul was one of an old, valued guard.

On the other hand, with the help of his spear, Harada leapt onto the wall and faced Shiranui. "I've not seen you since the Kinmon No Hen," he greeted Shiranui.

"Heh, between your spear and my pistol, which do you think has the upper hand at this range?" Shiranui replied. Thus, their duel started. Harada thrust the point of his spear towards Shiranui numerous times, but failed to injure him in any way. "You're too slow, Harada!" He was soon able to point the barrel of his pistol towards the center of Harada's forehead, but chose not to shoot. When Harada asked for a reason, he answered, "the sound of my shot would attract undue attention and ruin our mission."

On the ground, Kazama watched as one of the Shinsen-Gumi's spies approach Chizuru. "Come with me," the spy said, "We must head back to the headquarters." Knowing that he could no longer delay his attack, Kazama aimed for Hijikata, who could barely parry his downwards stroke in time.

"What do you bastards want the kid for?" Hijikata demanded. If Chizuru had been a mere page of his, he should not have had such a reaction at all. It would be the same for all of the men who rushed out from their positions within the castle to protect her.

"Chizuru is too valuable to stay in your company," Kazama replied. "She would blossom into a being far fairer and powerful if she came with us." Having faced Hijikata once before, Kazama could now read into his movements, and easily defended himself against him. The human had no hope of besting him at all. But, they were now pressed for time. Their presence at the castle must have been detected by the other members of the Shinsen-Gumi, particularly when their commanders had congregated in a single area. As he leapt backwards, Hijikata had been able to cut several strands of his hair, a move that piqued his interest immensely, showing that Hijikata was not as weak as he had previously anticipated.

"That is enough," Amagiri proclaimed. "It is meaningless for us to continue fighting thus. It would be troublesome if this drags on."

Acting upon his advice, Kazama leapt back onto the walls. "Since we have already confirmed our suspicions, there is no need for us to tarry long." Shiranui quickly ended his duel with Harada, while Saito failed to cut Amagiri, who moved so quickly that his movements could not be traced by Saito's human eyes, however keen they were. Kazama then fixed his attentions upon Chizuru. "We will be coming back for you soon."

Once more he looked into her eyes, and no longer found Chizo in them. No, she was her father's daughter, but he began to see more of herself in those eyes. She would not come with them easily, whether or not she was protected by the Shinsen-Gumi. A bond had already set between her and the Bakufu's hound-dogs and they would be utterly difficult to be severed.

Kazama would have to see whose resolve was stronger. Their will to protect her, or his, to see his plans carried out.

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><p>HAN: This would be the first attempt out of many that Kazama would try in bringing Chizuru to his side. As an added bonus, I would include Kazama's OVA into this fic, more likely because it involves much interaction not only between Kazama and Chizuru, but also between that of Kazama and Sen-hime as well as Hijikata, giving us glimpses that he is not so much of a bastard that everyone thinks he is. The dialogue at Nijio Castle was adapted from Episodes 6 and 7 of the anime. Do stay with me, because the next chapter, Sen-hime will finally meet Chizuru!<p>

CloudCarnivore: Of course he does! I would think that somewhere inside of him, he's really taken by the little girl who he knew was supposed to be his fiancée. Thank the Gods he found her, and in the battlefield, no less!

17. The Oni Council

When the Shogun had left Kyoto, another important meeting was held in the capital. The Oni Council convened in the Yase manor, upon receiving word from Kazama that he had found Yukimura Chizuru, and also to finally meet with their new leader, Sen-hime. Strangely, the leader of the Nagumo clan was not in attendance, citing that his affairs with the humans in the Tosa-han did not allow him to leave the domain. Eight of the Oni clans were gathered together, even the three Northern clans that usually preferred to stay within their own lands. The Hatsushimo, who were the descendants of the famed Shuutendouji, were absorbed into the Oni Council after they atoned for their ancestor's sins and were allowed to occupy the lands surrounding Ezo, as were the Oboro and the last Oni clan, who preferred not to use surnames, but would rather tattoo their family's sigil upon the foreheads of the clan leaders.

"We are here today to discuss the succession of Sen-hime and also the discovery of the lost Yukimura heir," Amagiri Kazutarou said, taking the responsibility of being the meeting's master of ceremonies. "The clans present are the Oboro, Hatsushimo, Suzumori, Kazama, Yase, Shiranui, Senjin's clan and that of mine. The Nagumo clan is excused due to pressing matters in Tosa."

At the completion of his words, each Oni clan leader bowed towards each other and then to Sen-hime. "Our heartfelt condolences to you, Sen-hime," Shiranui Kazujima, Shiranui Kyo's uncle, said to Sen-hime. "May your honored mother give you strength to lead our people in such dark times."

Sen-hime thanked Shiranui Kazujima for his kind words. "My mother would have loved to see all of us gathered here together," she said in a slightly sad tone, but perked up almost immediately after. "However, that's not the main reason why we're here. Kazama Chikage has found Yukimura Chizuru, and we must decide what we should do to help her."

All eyes turned towards Kazama. Ten years ago, his betrothal to Chizuru was seen as one of the greatest Oni unions in their age. Never before had two clans of such influence been joined in matrimony, and it would have brought much joy and prosperity to their

people. Now that Chizuru's identity was confirmed, it would give the Oni Council great relief to know that the Oni in the Tohoku region would once again have their protectors.

"Are you certain, Chikage?" asked the leader of the Oboro clan. He was the oldest in the Oni Council, reaching a ripe age of 200. No longer a sprightly youth, he resembled a human in his elder years and was seen to be the wisest among them. "What are the chances that you would discover your betrothed after ten years of being in the shadows?"

Kazama said nothing, but projected images of Chizuru to the Council with his powers. Through his eyes, he showed them Chizuru's actions at the Ikedaya Incident, Kinmon No Hen and also at Nijio Castle a few nights previous. There was then a chorus of voices, discussing Chizuru at length, from how she looked exactly like her mother to how her brows and eyes were exactly that of Yukimura Chizo's. The Suzumori clan leader, Chizuru's great-uncle by birth (and also that of Kimigiku's), could only sigh, remembering his great-niece and her brief happiness as a mother and wife after a period of long service as Senya's bodyguard and advisor.

"That wakizashi is no doubt the Shoutsuuren," Amagiri Kazutarou said once the images that Kazama had presented to them had receded back into the vaults of the latter's memories. The Yukimura clan were once great warriors like the Kazama and Amagiri clans, but in the times of peace of the years following the Battle of Sekigahara, they changed their profession to being doctors and healers, although the clan leaders preserved their family's own two-bladed kenjutsu style, which made the ownership of the katana, the Daitsuuren, and its wakizashi mate, the Shoutsuuren as the symbols of one's inheritance of the clan's leadership. The very fact that Chizuru and the Shoutsuuren were always seen together was clear enough evidence that she was the heir to the Yukimura clan.

However, there was still a second part to the riddle. Yukimura Chizo was blessed with a pair of twins. Now that Chizuru was found, where was Kaoru?

"Is it a coincidence that the new head of the Nagumo clan is also named Kaoru?" the leader of the Oboro clan asked the Council.

"My mother received word from another survivor of the Yukimura clan, Koudou, that he was adopted into the Nagumo clan," Sen-hime offered. "However, he has not moved from Tosa ever since he inherited the position, so no one can confirm if Nagumo Kaoru was Yukimura Kaoru."

The matriarch of the Hatsushimo clan bit her lip. "Can we trust the word of one Oni, much less one suspect of committing severe atrocities?" she asked the Council. Each report that Kazama had given to the Yase clan would be then disseminated to the other clans, which was why all of them were aware of everything that occurred in the capital.

"We don't have real proof that Yukimura Koudou is the one who engineered the fall of his clan, or that he is the one creating Oni fakes in the city," Sen-hime soothed the Hatsushimo matriarch. There would be no doubt that she was her mother's daughter, having the same regal, but non-imposing air about her. Senya would have been

immensely proud to see her daughter thus. "However, we cannot yet be sure that he is innocent."

"Yukimura Koudou burnt his own home and fled before I could discover anything," Kazama explained, clearly not giving himself any excuses. "It would seem that he is biding his time, and would reveal himself at a moment opportune only for him." Although it would seem that he had let his watch upon Koudou fall, but when even the wolf-pups of Mibu could not seek their former agent out, Koudou would have to remain in the shadows for a while longer.

Amagiri Kazutarou crossed his arms. "I think that it is best for us to look forwards," he said. As always, the children of the Amagiri clan were voices of reason in every organization they acted in, and were able to steer the thoughts of the group into more constructive areas. "Now that the Yukimura heir has come into the light, what is our decision on her? Should we welcome her back into our ranks, or should we respect the life she has had before her, living as a normal human?"

"I will not stand for the latter," Kazama replied. The Council fell silent and all eyes were then trained upon him. Apart from Sen-hime and the new Nagumo clan-leader, he was the youngest in the Council albeit wielding much influence and clout. The older ones often thought of him as a tempered youth who needed more years in his belt to see clearer into matters of their race, but time and again he proved that sometimes, it was change that was needed most by the Oni. "Chizuru has been left to the humans for far too long and has forgotten what she is and what she can be. She should be returned to our people as quickly as possible."

Still the Council was silent. Kazama knew that they were all suspecting the same thing. They were wondering about the intentions behind those words. Did he have some form of vested interest in wanting to bring Yukimura Chizuru back to the circles of the Oni? Was it specifically because he was formerly betrothed to her? The gains were obvious if he married Chizuru, even if she was the only one left in her family. The Yukimura clan still had claims over the Tohoku region, and would still retain the immense power of her clan upon the Council. In short, if Kazama married Chizuru, he would have partial say in the rule of Tohoku region, while still being the head of the western territories.

Of course, Kazama knew that the Council had feared hegemonic rule more than anything. That was why they ruled their own lands under the advice and guidance of the Yase clan from the central plains of Japan. "Once again I must remind the Council that Chizuru has no inkling of what she has inherited," he sighed, assuaging their concerns. "Thus, she would only know what we know when she has reentered the Council."

"Come now, we have seen Chikage mature into the fine young man he is for decades," Senjin, the leader of the nameless clan said. "Surely we would be no better than the humans if we start to suspect that he has designs to overthrow us all." Of course, what he said was true. Kazama never had any designs for more than what had been already given to him. It was a very Oni trait, and one that he was immensely proud of.

"Still, it does not answer the question of what we should do with the

girl," Shiranui Kazujima replied. "Ignorant of her identity or not, we must still remember that as long as she is alive, the claims she has upon the Tohoku region stands. Such a powerful seat cannot be left vacated for too long." The homes of the Yukimura clan might have been burnt down, their medicine stores, instructional books and scrolls destroyed, but the waters of their home were still clean and pure. Even with Chizuru alone, the clan can be rebuilt.

Sen-hime did not like the sound of their conversation at all. Having never known her birth father and just recently losing her mother, she was an orphan like Chizuru. Although it was only natural that she should inherit her mother's position of being the Princess of the Oni clans, it was her choice to do so as well. Now, they were all there, deciding Chizuru's future without even thinking that she could have a say in it. If Kazama would not stand for Chizuru remaining in the human world any second longer, then she would rather Chizuru stay because they had no right to choose for her.

"Enough!" Sen-hime exclaimed. "Have you listened to yourselves? We're deciding on Yukimura Chizuru's future as if our very lives depended on it! Whatever happened her freedom to choose?" Freedom was an Oni right. It was what they were willing to die for and they would do well to remember it. "None of us have the right to decide what she should do for her."

Most of the Councilors cast their head down. Their actions were inexcusable. "She also has the right to information," Kazama replied. "How can she make the decision to come with us or stay with the humans if she does not know anything about herself?"

"Kazama Chikage, you can tell her anything you want to tell her, but you can't force her to come with you," Sen-hime said, almost giving up on her stand. However, if there was one saving grace about her position would be that her words were final. Although the Oni Council had histories of secretly going against the words of the Yase-hime, but in the very least, her voice would be heard by them.

"Your words are heard, Sen-hime," Kazama acknowledged the princess's words, clearly impressed by her approach on this matter.

"Good," Sen-hime sighed. However, before she could continue, there was a knock on the door, and in came Kimigiku and Shiranui Kyo. "What is it?" she asked them both.

"Forgive our interruption, hime-sama, but Shiranui Kyo has a dire report to give to the Oni Council."

All eyes then turned towards Shiranui Kyo, particularly his uncle, Kazujima. "You have our permission to speak, Kyo," Kazujima said.

"I hate to say this, but the talks between Choushu and Satsuma have been completed. They're planning on forming some sort of alliance against the Bakufu," Shiranui said. "However, there's something else. Yukimura Koudou has surfaced. He brought the Ochimizu to Katsura Kogoro."

"What did Katsura Kogoro do?" the leader of the Oboro clan asked.

"Heâ€| didn't say anything," Shiranui answered plainly. "He just

showed Koudou away."

Inaction was a dangerous form of action, and the Oni Council knew that if the humans were allowed to continue their research in creating more Oni fakes, there would be terrible and immeasurable consequences that none in their generation were willing to bear. "What is the Council's decision?" Amagiri Kazutarou enquired, looking at each and every one of them in the eye.

At the end, the Council decided that they could not compel the humans to stop with their heinous experiments, because Yukimura Koudou had been forced by the Bakufu to create the monstrous fake Oni in the first place. If it was Koudou's wish to bring down the Bakufu using the fake Oni, it would be the only way he knew how, since he himself was unable to fight. What the Oni could do, was to advise the humans to stop in their foolishness. Kazama did not like the decision at all, but he could not act against the verdict of the Council.

"You know, they're only trying to minimize their involvement in this conflict," Shiranui explained as he and Kazama moved back into the city from the Yase manor. "It's not a bad thing. Maybeâ€¦ Yukimura Koudou should have some form ofâ€¦ closure."

"I fear that his meddling in the human world will go out of hand," Kazama replied. "Like it or not, the existence of the fakes will cause a rift between the balance of the human world and that of oursâ€¦"

Shiranui sighed. "I tried to tell those idiots that it was a bad idea, butâ€¦" Shiranui was as much as a Choushu spy and advisor as Kazama was to Satsuma. Now that both their domains were allied, they had all the more reason to work together. Choushu was now weak, although its leaders were strong. Although they now had allies like Satsuma and Tosa, their own strength still waned. That was why Katsura Kogoro entertained Yukimura Koudou's proposition. The worst blow to them was the realization that the Governor-General of the Kiheitai was now ridden with tuberculosis, an incurable disease that will kill him slowly. It was predicted that Takasugi would not see Choushu finally free from the Bakufu, nor would he see a new dawn reign over their country. "They need whatever they can get now."

"So long as they do not cross boundaries that cannot be crossed," Kazama replied. "Shiranui, you should not hesitate to seek us out if you need assistance."

Shiranui grinned. "I should say the same thing to you," he returned. "I heard that the Council barred you from kidnapping Yukimura Chizuru."

"Her coming to my side would only be a matter of time," Kazama said with his usual sideways grin. "She would not be able to resist me."

* * *

><p>Days after the meeting of the Oni Council, Sen-hime found herself in a little spot of trouble. She was strolling around the city when she saw a group of samurai harassing a small boy for whatever reason, and decided to aid the boy. "You will stop this unsightly behavior now!" she shouted at the three of them. However, her words went

unheeded, and the men had the audacity to name themselves as Imperialists who had come to the capital to aid the Emperor regain his power. "You are the worst of all!"

Before the men could do anything to her, a girl more or less her age, dressed like a boy shielded herself and the child with her own body. "Why are you bullying women and children?" the girl demanded. "Should you not protect them instead, as noble samurai?" The one thing that Sen-hime noticed the girl had was that wakizashi. It was the same one that Kazama had shown to the Council, which meant that the girl could be the lost Yukimura heir.

No doubt, those men were incited by her words. Unsheathing their katana, they would have killed her if not for the men of the Shinsen-Gumi who struck them before they could reach her. "Do not worry, I've only used the back of my katana to hit them," the leader of the Shinsen-Gumi patrol said. "You should not have been so reckless."

"Please forgive me," she stammered. "I just..."

"He's right, you know," Sen-hime said to the girl after returning the small boy to the care of his grandmother. "I could have handled the situation all by myself. However, you are very brave to face them like that. Thank you." She bowed her thanks to the girl and smiled as she returned the gesture, all while explaining that Saito, the patrol-leader, was the one who helped her. Sen-hime chuckled, and dismissed her modesty. "Since we've had the fate to meet each other, we should be friends, since we're both girls," she added, holding the girl's hands in hers. However the girl grimaced, bringing to Sen-hime's attention that she had dressed like a boy for a reason. "Heh? I'm sorry, I didn't know that you were meant to be disguised by the way, what is your name?"

"Yukimura Chizuru," the girl replied in a small voice. Now that she had seen the Yukimura heir with her own eyes, she would be able to have a close watch on her. It made Sen-hime doubly sure that the both of them were fated to meet.

"Pleased to meet you, Chizuru-chan," Sen-hime said with a smile. "You can call me 'Sen',"

"Sen?" Chizuru repeated, as if she was testing how Sen-hime's name sounded upon her tongue. "What about 'Osen-chan'?"

Sen-hime chirped happily. "Well that, I'll see you again soon, Chizuru-chan!" she said and went on her way, leaving Chizuru to her thoughts on the effectiveness of her male disguise. It was an answer that Saito refused to answer even though she had asked him about it. Knowing that Chizuru was under the guard of the Shinsen-Gumi lightened her heart a little. It would mean that if there was any time when Kazama decided to throw her orders into the wind, Chizuru would have some form of protection against him. However, if it did come to a time when Chizuru would actually acquiesce to Kazama's wishes willingly, she would have to respect that decision as well. She could only mediate peace between Chizuru and Kazama, and she hoped that she would not need to do too much of it, for both their sakes.

* * *

><p>HAN: Finally, Sen-hime and Chizuru meet! This ends the coverage of Episode 7 of the anime in this fic. I omitted the part where Kazama enters the Nishi Hongan-Ji and tells Chizuru that Koudou has joined the Choushu-han because it would seem redundant to say the same thing in the same chapter. Also, I was only able to finally discover the names of the remaining two oni clans, which are Oboro and Hatsushimo. Oboro is the surname of one of the villains in Toki No Kizuna, depending on the route, and Hatsushimo is the surname of Senkimaru, one of the playable routes in the game as well. I would have to say that this chapter has the most amount of Oni politics in it, so if you're into that kinda stuff, then I hope that you'll enjoy it!<p>

AnnaChan310: I have the answer for your question in Chapters 8-9 of The Quest, heh heh heh. I hope that you'll find it satisfactory. There is also a part in Yuugiroku 2 when Kazama gets jealous over a sakura tree that Chizuru really liked, so there's that. :3

18. The Geiko

December of the Second Year of Keio (January 1867)

The Bakufu was in utter disarray. Formerly facing one powerful, but errant domain, the Choushu-han was now joined by the Satsuma-han. It would have seemed now that all the hostility given to Choushu in the early days of the conflict was only for show, that with all its food, increased military spending and able leaders, Satsuma had planned to defy the Bakufu well in the beginning. Now, the rebels called themselves the Sat-Chou Alliance. Slogans like sonno-joi fell unused, because their primary goal now was to bring down the Bakufu and install themselves as the new rulers of Japan with the Emperor at their head.

However, it was also at this time when the Shinsen-Gumi was seen to be of great value to the Bakufu. Formerly a group of masterless ronin, their achievements and relative effectiveness of keeping the streets of Kyoto clean had garnered them a spot of equal praise and disdain. To the Bakufu, they were last beacons of hope, a unit that could be depended upon, no matter the time and circumstance, and to that of the Sat-Chou Alliance, they were bitter enemies that had to be overthrown immediately.

Thus, in the cold winter months, one Toubaku faction decided to try their luck. They were a foolish bunch, because they decided to gather any ears that would listen to them at the Sumiya, and week after week as more joined them, they realized their plan of action: to attack the headquarters of the Shinsen-Gumi. The first to hear of such a daring (but also highly preposterous) idea, was luckily Sen-hime herself, who had been doing her rounds as the young proprietress of the Sumiya.

Knowing that this information could only drop into the ears of the Shinsen-Gumi, Sen-hime cleverly positioned herself in one of the Shinsen-Gumi's patrol routes, knowing that she would most definitely find them in broad daylight, marching in the streets of the capital. In fact, she spotted them, not a great distance from the gates that led to Shimabara, and as luck would have had it, Yukimura Chizuru was amongst them.

"Chizuru-chan!" she called towards Chizuru, who walked at the end of the patrol, waving happily.

"Osen-chan!" Chizuru called back, running towards her.

"What a coincidence!" Sen-hime chirped. "Are you on patrol?"

Chizuru nodded, but their conversation was interrupted by a young man, who also addressed the last Yukimura heir as "Chizuru-chan". It would mean that he would most definitely be one of her protectors from within the Shinsen-Gumi. "Who is she?" the man asked Chizuru. Sen-hime also realized that the moment he turned towards them, the rest of them did so. This man was most probably the leader of the patrol, effectively one of the Captains of the Shinsen-Gumi's ten divisions. Chizuru named him as Okita, the Captain of the First Division.

Of course, Sen-hime would introduce herself to Okita without delay. "My name is Osen," she said, knowing that it would make sense to use the name that Chizuru had used to address her with. "You could say that Chizuru-chan and I became friends over dango," she added, chuckling with Chizuru. Ever since they both met, they had talked with one another over tea and dango, usually supervised by Harada, whenever he was able to accompany Chizuru out of the Shinsen-Gumi's headquarters.

"I didn't know that you knew anyone in the capital, Chizuru-chan," Okita said, noticed that Sen-hime had already turned her attentions towards Chizuru. Nonetheless, he decided to listen in on their conversation, because Sen-hime seemed quiteâ€¦ interesting. It almost seemed as if the girl had presented herself at the right time and place on purposeâ€¦

Sen-hime looked left and right before telling Chizuru, "I heard this from a geiko that I know in Shimabara that unfamiliar roshi are gathering at the Sumiya, plotting terrible things like attacking the Shinsen-Gumi headquarters!" Adding that she was going to the Shinsen-Gumi headquarters anyways, she furrowed her brows into a serious expression to ensure her act was convincing enough.

"It would seem like an interesting story," Okita commented, once again interrupting them. This man's eyes were keen, and it would take more than the innocent act to get by him, Sen-hime mused. "But it would seem suspicious that you would go out of your way just to tell us hearsay from Shimabara."

"Oh, I did it because I was concerned about Chizuru-chan!" Sen-hime replied, holding Chizuru's hands in hers to prove her point. She seemed to be able to throw off Okita's questioning, judging by how he was now deep in thought. Chizuru had thanked her for her kind consideration, but she merely smiled. After all, her intentions were just that: to ensure Chizuru's safety.

"Hmm, but even so, it would be highly impossible to station the Shinsen-Gumi in Shimabara openly," Okita mused. Shimabara had been neutral ground in the capital, where weapons of any kind were not allowed to be worn, of course, unless with special permission. A great armed presence in the hanamachi would mean that the authorities were suspicious of any sort of activity there, and would scare away

all the snakes in the grass. Then, an idea struck him. "Chizuru-chan, you could be of help in this matter."

"Eh?" Chizuru asked, blinking her large, doe-line eyes of honey in confusion.

Okita grinned upon her reaction. "I remembered clearly that you were dressed as a geiko when we went to the Sumiya last summer and you looked rather prettyâ€¦" He was implying that she should infiltrate the Sumiya as a geiko to relay information back to the Shinsen-Gumiâ€¦ a task that would be highly monumental in preventing any attack upon the headquarters if done successfully.

"Is it true?" Sen-hime asked Okita. "Chizuru-chan must have looked terribly beautiful as a geiko! I'd want to see such a sight if I couldâ€¦"

Chuckling, Okita knew that Chizuru no longer had a choice. "So, I gather that you'd do it then, Chizuru-chan?" he asked her.

"Eh?" Chizuru muttered. Once she saw the cat-like, mischievous expression on Okita's face, she knew that her fate had already been sealed. "EH?"

* * *

><p>Thus, it came to pass that a mysterious beauty arrived in Shimabara. A very, very young geiko dressed in rich reds and greens. A fresh face at the Sumiya, reportedly transferred from another tea-house at the rivalling Gion district had come. Needless to say, everyone rushed into the Sumiya to have a glance at the new geiko, but she had been reserved by a veryâ€¦ precise clientele that night and was assigned to a banquet hall in the second floor of the establishment, just next to where the Satsuma delegation were placed that night.<p>

"Have you heard?" asked one of the Satsuma officers to another. "There is a group of ronin who have racked up the balls to want to try attacking the Shinsen-Gumi at their headquartersâ€¦"

The other Satsuma officer raised an eyebrow. "Not even us and our friends dare to try a stunt like that," he replied. "What makes them think that they can do what we cannot?"

"It is most probably empty talk from drunken circles," Kazama Chikage replied. He was there that night, as with most nights, to gather information. He would have found reconnaissance missions elsewhere tedious, dreary and boring, but being at the Sumiya at least gave him one of the many comforts of home. He was, after all, responsible for supplying the Sumiya with the sake and shochu that his clan brewed. "Anyone with half a brain would have thought twice about attacking those country dogs in their own nest."

However, as with alcohol and humans, the conversation turned to the worst possible subjects, ranging from the rolling of heads upon the battlefield toâ€¦ rolling around of the most lewd kind. Knowing that he would most likely kill them at the slightest provocation, Kazama decided to be wiser and step outside of their room for a bit of fresh air. It was then when he had the opportunity to see the new geiko, a petite girl who was highly pleasing to the eye.

If the girl had been an ordinary human geiko, he would have easily let her out of his sight. However, he would recognize that particular girl before him because he knew what a jewel she was truly. Brown hair and eyes would have been so common amongst Japanese girls, but not in the particular shades that colored the girl before him. The brown in her hair was tinged with a slight green hue, features of the Suzumori clan, and her eyes were too fair to belong to that of a human Japanese girl, although brown they remained. Her eyes were the most telling trait of the Yukimura clan, which meant that she was none other than Chizuru, his betrothed.

"Bring me some wine," he commanded, speaking in a manner as one usually would with a geiko. She hesitated, naturally, he explained, just as a bout of laughter escaped from the room from whence he had come. "I tire of their useless, idiotic chatter. It is a disrespect to waste such good sake on such inferior company." Her eyes widened, in surprise and in fear when she started to realize that she had no way to escape him. It only made him question how desperate the Shinsen-Gumi were, resorting to use her as a method to gather information. Her inexperience in the matters of the hanamachi would be the downfall of the operation, and thus, he decided to give her a hand. "Quickly now, are you not a geiko of this establishment?"

Chizuru quickly acted on his instruction, and sent word for more sake. She led him into the room where she was stationed and said, "The sake is already on its way, please wait a moment." As sincere as her efforts were, Kazama realized that her accent was off.

"How strange that you do not speak like the other geiko here," he said, noting that she had spoken in the eastern dialects. "Were you born in the east?"

Gasping upon realizing her mistake, Chizuru apologized. "I'm still new here and have not gotten used to it."

"All the geiko in Kyoto are raised in the city itself, learning their art and trade since they were servant-girls," Kazama explained, calling her bluff. No doubt, those that put her into the operation that failed to teach her even the simplest of things that a geiko should have had. She would have been denounced as a spy within seconds if she had been in the company of others. "Now, let us cease with all the tricks, Yukimura Chizuru. Do you think that I would be unable to recognize you at all?" He leaned into her and held her chin, trying to steal a kiss from those lips. "Your beauty cannot be hidden or concealed," he whispered to her. "It is a trait belonging rightly to my future wife."

Of all the things she could have done, the girl resisted him. "I'm not your wife!" she pleaded. Of course, it would be difficult for her to remember, but the fact that they were betrothed ran plain as day. She would be privy to the fact sooner or later, and he realized that the sooner she was by his side, the safer she would be from the bloody conflicts that she had thrust herself into by joining the hounds of the Bakufu.

"This is a compliment that no other can give you," he replied, moving even closer to her. "You should be honored." But then again, only the country dogs you adore so much would be so desperate to put you

into the field for information."

It would seem that even when she was trapped and cornered, Chizuru still had a few good ideas up her sleeve. "Then why don't you just tell me what they're planning?" she demanded, meeting her honey-colored eyes with his ruby ones. There was something within her, something that stirred, causing her to resist his advances when other women would have already been his by then.

"You are the only one who dares to use such a tone of voice when speaking to me," he praised. "Very well then, I shall tell you what I know: several men who have been exiled from their domains have come up with the plan to attack the Shinsen-Gumi headquarters in order to win themselves positions of honor." He had lurked in the Sumiya for days and this much was all he could get, not because he had been lax in his duties, more so because the perpetrators themselves could not advance in their plans, spending more time drinking and talking than actually doing anything.

He could have succeeded in his plans to woo her, if not for the impact of a fan upon his head, and the ensuing presence of Sen-hime. "Behave yourself!" she exclaimed as he unwittingly released Chizuru from his grasp. "Chizuru-chan, run when you still can!"

Chizuru ran, of course. "Wait, I still have notâ€¦" Kazama's words fell upon unhearing ears even as he got up to pursue her.

"Didn't you know that clingy men scare off women?" Sen-hime asked him. "It's no wonder that your behavior appalls Chizuru-chan." Kazama no longer had a choice but to listen to what Sen-hime had to say, now that she had caught him red-handed. Knowing that he would not be let off for long, he ordered a decent meal so that he could eat while he was being lectured by her. "Kazama Chikage, you are absolutely clueless in courting women!" the girl exclaimed, finally speaking her mind.

"So, you would lecture me on how to court a woman?" Kazama asked in reply. He had been mistaken. This girl not only had her mother's strength, she had an air of impetuosity as well. Taking it in stride, knowing that as a young clan-leader and also the Oni princess, she would have to cultivate the air of her presence. He would humor her as long as he was able to.

Sen-hime harrumphed. "You must have been raised in such a way that as the leader of your clan, with acceptable outward features, you would be swimming in the company of women," she said. What she said held partial truth, actually. He had learned that he had certain charms that would have been irresistible to women, but he had no interest in them at all. What he needed in a woman was for her to be a pure-blooded Oni girl, and sadly, of the two that could be classified in that criteria, one had run away from him moments ago, and the other was right before him, giving him a lecture. This time, he was trebly sure that he would not be the one who would take her hand in matrimony. It was not that he was a misogynist and preferred meek women, it was the fact that the traits of her bloodlines were too dominant within her. "You must never think about what women wantâ€¦! _Are you listening to me?_"

Puffing up in anger, Sen-hime could only helplessly watch as Kazama ate his food, completely disregarding her. "Did you say anything?" he

asked her.

"I was saying that you should be considerate towards what a woman wants!"

"There is no need to consider such a thing," Kazama answered plainly, causing both Sen-hime and her bodyguard, Kimigiku to gasp in utter surprise.

"Well besides that, you weren't here just to take Chizuru-chan away, weren't you?" Sen-hime asked. Kazama was silent, more or less because she was not wrong in her observation. He decided that it would do no harm in listening to her observations. "You were here to gather information that the Satsuma-han needs about the other domains and just happened upon Chizuru-chan. You thought that she would be walking into a trap and decided to take her away. Your intentions might be good, but your methods were utterly abysmal!"

Kazama had Kimigiku serve him his sake and commented, "I think I shall tarry a moment here. The sake is not bad at all." In all honesty, Sen-hime had all the markings of a great leader. Her observational skills were top-notch, and if she were to control her temperament in the very slightest, she would have at least a shadow of her mother's talents. It was at this moment that he decided that he would not mind her rule at all.

"Now you'll have to be honest with me," Sen-hime said, almost finishing her lecture. "What do you really think about Chizuru-chan?" During the meeting of the Oni Council, he had said that he would not stand for Chizuru to remain with the humans any longer, and here, he tried to take her away. It seemed to Sen-hime that Kazama really was adamant in having Chizuru as his wife, whether or not she was willing to follow him. If this was the case, then she would fight the hardest to help Chizuru escape from his clutches, because she believed in a love-match, as did all the matriarchs of the Yase clan before her.

"Yukimura Chizuru is a rare jewel," Kazama replied. "She belongs to the original bloodline of a clan upon the Oni Council, and it is indisputable that she should be brought back into the circles of our people." He was merely stating the obvious, but at least for now, Sen-hime found no words to rebut him with. "As you might have known, only one in five of our people are female. Chizuru is not only a female Oni, but also the heir to her clan's leadership, which makes her even more precious. If I married her, we could reinstate the Yukimura clan back into our population. It does not matter if there is love involved between us. This is a matter of necessity."

For the second time in a row, Kazama had revealed that his designs for Chizuru was based upon the needs of the Oni, and not that of his own. He would marry Chizuru, by will or by force, just for those reasons alone, and there would be nothing to stop him. Of course, Sen-hime did not believe such intentions one bit. Oni marriages were built upon equal terms, and even betrothals. He must have his reasons for wanting her as his bride, whether or not if it was for the good for their people or not, and unless he told Sen-hime what they were, she was sure to assist Chizuru in escaping him by any means necessary.

"Our hime-sama is a pure-blooded Oni female of her original line as

well," Kimigiku suggested, cheekily, in an attempt to perhaps provide Kazama with another alternative.

"Would you want to be taken by me?" Kazama asked Sen-hime, following Kimigiku's suggestion. It was a pure jest, knowing very well that Sen-hime herself had not considered marriage for herself yet, especially since her foothold upon the government of their people had only just begun.

"I have no wish for that whatsoever," Sen-hime answered, shaking her head. If she were to marry, it would be for love, and nothing more. "Back to you, Kazama Chikage. If you want a woman to fall for you, you should show her how you truly feel and not take her by force. You could even say, 'Come with me,' and show her that you careâ€|"

Outside their room, the interruptions seemed to have gotten rowdier and rowdier. There was even mention of a ninja who flipped over the tatami mats to protect his chargeâ€| No doubt, Chizuru and her gang of country-bred wolf-pups were behind this mess. The din seemed to have driven Sen-hime well over the edge and she rose to investigate what the matter was. "Wait here," she told Kazama even as she opened the door. "I'm not finished with you."

Kazama did not seem to defy her, but when Sen-hime and Kimigiku left, he too made his move and left the room. He had no time to wait for another lecture by Sen-hime and would be needed back in the Satsuma-han for his report. He was about to descend the stairs that led to the ground floor when Chizuru bumped into him yet again. "Did you come back for me so that I could take you away?" he teased her.

"Kazama-sanâ€|" she murmured his name, but seemed to be preoccupied. Before she could say aught else, a drunk man approached her and held her by the shoulder despite her rejections of his advances. Wordlessly, Kazama took her hand and pulled her behind him while beating the drunk man at the back of the neck, garnering him unconscious. It would seem that the entire Sumiya was at an uproar, with men of the Shinsen-Gumi picking fights with the customers left, right and center.

"It would seem that my investigation here for the Satsuma-han would have to end prematurely," he told Chizuru, who was utterly aghast by what she saw. The girl was so frightened that she seemed to be frozen where she stood. "I have had my share of fun tonight, it would do you good to disappear now." Finally knowing the meaning of his words, Chizuru quickly gave him a parting bow and ran down the stairs as fast as she could. There would be no doubt that she would be in the safety of her guardians soon.

Of all the encounters he had with her, Kazama had to admit that this had been the mostâ€| interesting in all of them. Although he doubted the ability of the Shinsen-Gumi in sending a timid, shy girl into the field, she at least had the brains to use him as a source of information even when she was cornered. It would seem that although she was heavily protected, she still had some courage in her a trait that was highly admirable. Beauty, cleverness and braveness, she would be a suitable bride for him indeed.

><p>HAN: I'm sorry if I'm a little late for this chapter. I was down with the flu among other things, heh heh! I used material from both Zuisouroku and Kazama's Sekkaroku OVA episode for Chizuru's geiko scene and solely the OVA when Sen-hime lectured Kazama. I would think that he won't ever want to mention that he wants to marry Chizuru so badly because he promised Chizuru's father to Sen-hime because 1) she wouldn't understand what it meant to him and 2) only those nearest to him knew, like Amagiri and Shiranui. I would think that while it's easy to control Kazama using authority, it would make it immensely difficult to understand him if one used a position of power over him.<p>

AnnaChan310 and CloudCarnivore: Thank you! I hope that you will enjoy this chapter as well.

19. The Yukimura Twins

"_Chikage, I _knew_ that you wouldn't be able to resist my darling daughter, heh heh," Yukimura Chizo told him. "Thanks for helping her the other night. Natsuko and I were so worried that she would have been discovered by those idiotic roshi."_

"_Ahouâ€|" he replied. "I would have done the same for you, even if you were the one dressed up as a geiko."_

Chizo bellowed in laughter following his jest. "Wouldn't that be a sight for all to see? No one would want to be my danna if I really were a geiko." He was laughing so hard that he could not even open his eyes. "Ne, Chikage, I think it's time that you lived for yourself."

"_What do you mean?"_

"_All this while, you've been living your days in the service of others. It's high time that you walked your own path because you wanted to. You might be Kazama Chikage, head of the Kazama clan, leader of the western Oni, official of the Satsuma-han, but when have you ever made a choice, just because Chikage the person wants to?"_

"_Even a libertine like you had to have some responsibility," he replied. "Wasn't that why youâ€|"_

"_It's not fair for my daughter if you would pursue her with such a heart," Chizo chided. "She has other suitors you know, those from the Shinsen-Gumiâ€| But they would not hold a candle to you in the grand design of thingsâ€| Remember what I said, Chikage. Make your decisions because you want to make them. No one can watch over your shoulder and guide you forever."_

"_You're saying this as if your days in the afterlife are over."_

"_They areâ€| in a way. Souls like ours cannot remain in the same plane forever. You won't see or hear me again from now onwards. I wish you well."_

_He sighed. "It won't be the first time you left me alone, you

bastard." He looked up and saw Chizo smiling at him. "Goodbye, it is then." _

Chizo smiled. "Goodbye, my old friend. Senya-dono offers her greetings too. She thanks you for not giving her daughter a hard time."

* * *

><p>Kazama woke from his daydream, and realized that it would be the last time in his life where he would feel the presence of Chizo, whether in the recesses of his mind, the only place where he could at least not maintain a façade of strength and power, or in the literal sense, because they, the Oni, believed in the spirits of those that had passed lingering on to aid them in their ventures. He did not want to raise such metaphysical questions, not because they hurt his head and confused him, but merely because he had no time to play around with them. If it had been his mind's own way of coming to a decision that he should be the master of his own fate, then so be it.<p>

"The falling snow matches this city well," he commented as he looked out the window, enjoying a long drag of tobacco upon his pipe. "It is admirable that the humans who built this city have the ability to design anything with such elegance, despite their foolishness and bloodlustâ€|"

"Kazama, are you listening to me?" Amagiri demanded for the umpteenth time. There were times when Amagiri would indulge him in drifting away in his thoughts, but this was not the moment to do so. There were matters of import that he had to discuss with him and he would like to have them resolved sooner than later.

Kazama grimaced. "You don't have to speak so loudly," he replied and puffed out a bit of smoke. "Yes, I'll remember to keep an eye on the safety arrangements for Emperor Koumei." The Emperor was getting more and more restless. Eager to restore his own power, he had given all his confidence to the Sat-Chou Alliance. However, there was only so much that he could have done while the Bakufu was still in power.

"Then what is your next plan of action?" Amagiri asked further. "I realize that you have no interest in the activities of our domainâ€|"

Still, Kazama looked outwards, towards the falling snow. It was falling so heavily that there was not much to see upon the streets. Everyone was most likely huddled indoors, waiting for the snow to cease, where warm hearths enveloped them. "We are here to repay the debts of protection and land our ancestors owed to the Satsuma-han," Kazama reminded Amagiri. "However, now that Satsuma has joined with Choushu, the reign of the Bakufu will end soon. Satsuma's rise in power in the courts was to ultimately overthrow the Tokugawa Bakufu. We, the Oni, have no need to support them to any great extent."

He had been the one who had protected the secrets of the early meetings between Satsuma and Choushu. He had been the one, along with Amagiri, who spied upon Choushu, to gauge its suitability as a partner, and as a secret extension of fellowship, he had been the one who ensured that the Choushu radicals, led by Kusaka Genzui, managed

to avert the eyes of the Bakufu onto Mount Tennou, where they committed seppuku as a mass ritual, when Choushu torched the city to the ground. His service to the Sat-Chou Alliance had more than fulfilled the needs to repay the debt that the ancestors of the Amagiri and Kazama clans had taken onto themselves.

"You may be right," Amagiri said. "However, we still must carry out the duties entrusted to us." The Emperor would soon be on the move. His sister would be married off to the Shogun soon, and their retinues would pass through a path that they were familiar with, a path that was heavily guarded by that of their own kind.

"Tomorrow, the snow will stop falling," he observed. The skies were less grey than the days previous. "We shall visit the girl who lives in Yase."

They stopped at the front gate of one of the outposts leading to Yase village. It was once a village where all of the Oni could come and go as they pleased, a stronghold of their people. Now, in the turbulent times when Japan was about to be plunged into civil war, that stronghold had been moved to the Sumiya. It was a defensive measure, applied only after the death of Senya due to the unpredictability of Japanese politics. No one was to approach the village without invitation, except for assemblies of the Oni Council.

There, they spotted Sen-hime, being escorted by Kimigiku, making her way back to Yase village. Kimigiku immediately raised her arm, signaling Sen-hime not to move forwards upon sensing Amagiri's presence. "Amagiri!" Sen-hime exclaimed when Amagiri revealed himself.

"Forgive my intrusion," Amagiri apologized, even though it was highly evident that he was there on purpose.

"This road leads to Yase village," Kimigiku warned. "What is your business here?"

Kazama harrumphed, showing himself to the princess and her bodyguard. "I would like to see for myself how the upper echelons of our people deal with the Imperial Court." Like how the Kazama and Amagiri clans were indebted and allied to the Shimazu clan, the Yase clan was not as independent as they were thought to be. Their human patrons were the Japanese Imperial Family themselves, the rulers of the Chrysanthemum Throne.

"Kazama, shouldn't you be back in Satsuma?" Sen-hime demanded. She had known for weeks now that Kazama had no longer wanted to participate in anything having to do with the Satsuma-han. She had thought that he would have already returned to his lands, readying to move his people to safer areas.

However, it would seem that neither Amagiri nor Kazama were interested in their affairs, but that of the humans. "The capital has been under heavy guard these past days," Amagiri noted. "Surely, there has been some activity within the Imperial Palace?"

"Let me guess," Kazama broke in. "Emperor Koumei's health hasn't been improving, hasn't it?" With the ailment of the Emperor gaining severity, there was now need to ensure that the capital was secure. Who else but the Yase clan had the ability to cast a web of

protection and security around Kyoto, in order to ensure a smooth succession? Sen-hime offered no reply, which only confirmed his suspicions. The death of the Emperor would mean that there would be a vacuum of power. It would have to be filled with those that had the backing of the Crown Prince, whose allegiance must be clear. If the Crown Prince had the ear of the Bakufu, then the efforts of the Sat-Chou Alliance would have been for naught.

Having the information that he needed, Kazama turned to leave. There was no need for him to infiltrate Yase village and risk the anger of the Oni rulers after all. However, they could easily sense that they were not the only ones in the area. There had been a third party, eavesdropping in the trees. One that was easily caught as soon as Sen-hime made her way back into Yase, leaving Kazama and Amagiri to pursue them.

Kazama could easily spot the perpetrator, who was leaping from tree to tree, making their way back to the capital. Picking up a log, he threw it towards them, causing the spy to use their katana to deflect the log, and when they landed, it was soon apparent that the assailant was dressed as a woman, in the pinks and beiges favored by his future wife, Yukimura Chizuru. In fact, the spy looked _just_ like Chizuru, with the right amounts of cosmetics applied, ornamentation used. However, as with Chizuru, appearances weren't substantial proof. They needed more evidence to fully identify the boy as the older of Yukimura Chizo's children.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Kazama asked the spy, who seemed deeply angered at being sighted.

"I have business in the capital," the spy replied, in a highly feminine voice. Who was he trying to fool? He would have made a very convincing woman indeed, but those with slightly keener senses would have easily seen through his disguise.

"You would have to be very brave to have a hobby of eavesdropping upon our conversations," Kazama noted. The boy dressed in girl's clothing was about to make his move to leave, but was stopped by Amagiri's presence.

"No doubt, he was given the instructions to do so by the Tosa-han," Amagiri said calmly. The boy was most definitely the missing Oni Councilor, the one that did not answer the call of the Council to attend the previous meeting. "We have heard that you might have been in the capital these days, but this would be the first time for us to have made your acquaintance." Out of the demands of Oni courtesy, Amagiri bowed towards the boy in greeting.

The boy grinned and turned towards Kazama and Amagiri, focusing on the former. "It would be the same on my side," he replied, still using a feminine manner. "You two would have survived thus long under the aid of the Satsuma-han, would you not?" Kazama chose not to respond to his biting query. It would not be the best of wisdom to be provoked by a mere child, equal to his station or no. "However, I am not the only one who has eavesdropped on you and our princess."

Shiranui Kyo was there too, hiding in the trees as they conversed. "I'm guilty as charged," Shiranui said, leaping down from his perch. "If anything happens within the capital, we (Choushu) would have to

act as well. So, who is this?"

"Forgive me for my late introduction," the boy said to Shiranui. "I am Nagumo Kaoru from the Tosa-han, leader of the Nagumo clan."

"It's unimaginable that the Nagumo clan would be led by a runt like that," Shiranui mused, looking towards Kazama, who had a sly grin on his face.

"You should just call him a 'little girl', since he's into dressing himself as one," Kazama replied jokingly.

"Ara, I didn't imagine that Satsuma and Choushu were on such good terms," Kaoru jested. "However, I have heard tell that the leader of the Kazama clan has taken great interest into the affairs of the Shinsen-Gumi."

At those words, Kazama frowned. "What do you mean?" he menaced, ruby eyes narrowing into mere slits, making look more like an angered beast than the elegant Oni leader he was.

The boy started to unfurl the silks that held his katana and said, "I am asking you to keep your distance from Yukimura Chizuru." Once he had revealed his katana, there was no mistake. The boy that was Nagumo Kaoru was wielding the Daitsuuren, the katana that signified the leadership of the Yukimura clan. At once, it was immediately clear that there was no coincidence whatsoever that the leader of the Nagumo clan had the same given name as Yukimura Chizo's son. Simply put, Nagumo Kaoru was Yukimura Kaoru at one point of his life.

Kazama was not one to bow to such an empty threat. "What would you do to stop me?" he asked Kaoru.

"I have been protecting her afar for too long," Kaoru returned, hostility reverberating through his small body. His hand flew towards the hilt of his katana, signifying that he was ready to attack at any moment. "I will not hand her to you."

"Hmph, you can do little but continue to work in the shadows," Kazama said, obviously provoking the boy. "You have nothing but lies and shadows."

Kaoru seemed to bear Kazama's insults no longer, and began to attack him. The differences in ability was stark. Kaoru should have no hope in defending himself against Kazama, who had no interest in joining the duel. "This is how you would run from a fight, as you have hidden behind the protection of Satsuma."

Those words were enough to warrant death. "Do you wish to be killed?" Kazama asked the boy, raising the tsuba of his own katana with his thumb. If provoked into fighting, there would be no return. It would only mean death for Kaoru, and prolonged conflict between the Kazama and Nagumo clans.

Shiranui was the one who decided to diffuse the situation. "Oi, it's time to cut it out," he said, patting the boy on the shoulder. However, the boy was thankless and delivered a horizontal arc towards him, causing him to leap backwards and point his pistol towards him instead.

Knowing that it was impossible for him to win this fight, Kaoru did the only thing left open for him. "We shall put an end to this nonsense," he said, openly sheathing his katana. It was a gift that he had earned only through lineage and nothing else. "If you dare lay a hand upon Chizuru, I will show no mercy." With those words, he leapt back into the trees, making his way forwards towards Kyoto city.

"Do we pursue?" Amagiri asked Kazama, who seemed to have calmed down from the exchange.

"Leave him," Kazama replied. It would be needless to challenge one such as Nagumo Kaoru. He had not the skills nor the temperament to fight upon equal footing with him.

Shiranui then said, "I should be off too. I'll see you two somewhere else."

Finally, silence was returned to both Kazama and Amagiri. "Amagiri, start the preparations to move our families," Kazama instructed, looking towards the mountains that formed the roof of Kyoto. "The final conflict will come next spring, and we have to make sure that our people are well-hidden by then."

"Understood," Amagiri replied and proceeded to make the plans for the journey back to Satsuma to ensure that the migration of the Oni villages in not only Satsuma, but all of the western territories were well under way. Even Kazama would have to leave the capital for the time to make sure that the preparations were in order.

* * *

><p>January of the Third Year of Keio. (February 1867)<p>

It took Amagiri around two weeks to carry out the logistics of their short move back to Satsuma. Citing an important meeting with the clan elders of their families, he and Amagiri had retrieved special permission to be relieved of their duties until they returned.

During the time between the hour of his departure back to Kagoshima and the remaining hours he had in the capital, Kazama decided to take a stroll in the city. It would give him the opportunity to marvel and the streets and temples and beautiful estates and manors of the capital, and a private moment for him to think, and who better to bump into when he was visiting a particularly popular Shinto temple but his future wife, Chizuru.

"I see no hound of the Bakufu around here," he commented as he regarded her, looking upon him fiercely, as though he was truly her enemy. "What is a caged bird like yourself doing here all alone?" The girl was so small and light that she was easily pushed about by the scores and scores of people passing by between them. There were many times when she was almost knocked over, but was still determined to guard herself against him. "It would help if you did not regard me so fiercely. Such an expression does not suit you at all." Once again, the girl was pushed by the crowd, and she seemed to have given up on her façade of ferocity. "Come with me," he harrumphed, turning around to lead her away from the massive temple-going crowd.

"Eh?" she could only manage to say, disbelieving her very ears.

"Relax, I'll not do anything to you today," Kazama soothed her fears. "I'll be merely returning you to your gilded cage." The girl hesitated at first, but realized that she had no choice but to follow him, for whatever reason. They walked from the façade of the temple, right down the stairs of its entrance and back into the streets of the city, where the crowds would soon thin.

It would already be sunset by the time they were no longer engulfed by a sea of people. No words were exchanged between them, but he could feel her eyes upon him. He could feel her confusion, not knowing what to make of him. It was the same kind of confusion that she had felt when she first met him at five years old.

When they reached the banks of the River Kamo, she decided to speak. "Thank you for sending me thus far," she said, her words perfectly mannered. "I'll be fine from hereâ€|"

"I have no intentions of leaving a woman to walk home alone after sundown," Kazama replied instead. "It is dangerous to be unchaperoned at this hour." For some reason, she chuckled at his words, causing him to raise an eyebrow. "Is there anything wrong?"

Still trying hard not to chuckle, Chizuru shook her head. "Iie," she answered. "It's justâ€| hard, hearing you say anything like that, Kazama-san." All that she had ever known about him was that he was highly hostile to the Shinsen-Gumi, naturally being a combatant of the Satsuma-han. She could never fathom why he insisted on her being his future bride either, but would generally prefer to leave the subject alone. "It's justâ€| surreal to me."

"Then, I shall revert to how I usually deal with you," Kazama jested, bending down so that he could regard her closely. "Would you like to be taken away by me?" Purposely lowering the timbre of his voice, he grinned widely and evilly as he saw her face redden, withdrawing from him immediately.

"Iâ€| I didn't mean that!" she objected, but Kazama quickly reverted back into his own space, leaving hers.

"I was merely joking," he told her, and restarted their journey back to the Nishi Hongan-Ji, the Wolves' den, and also where wolf-pups had kept her in a gilded cage. "You might think that I am nothing more than a beast, but our people value tradition more than anything. I will not take you away without rhyme or reason. We are not like the humans, who simply fight amongst one another over power and influence. Our people value peace and freedom more than our lives. You would do well to know this."

Those words that he had said to her had been said to him by her father, in an age forgotten long ago. If anything, it would be the only way she would ever know about Yukimura Chizo, through him. He did not care to look back towards her, but he felt from her Ki that her mood had slightly lightened. "Neâ€| Kazama-san," she chirped as they got closer to her cage. "Would you mind if I asked you a question?"

"Go ahead," he replied absently.

"Why are you always after me and the Shinsen-Gumi?"

Sighing, he turned towards her slightly. "I know that you have no realization that you are one of the Oni," he told her, his tone more serious, demanding her full, undivided attention. "We have appearances similar to that of humans, but our wounds heal within seconds, and we gain great powers when we surround ourselves in rage and anger. That is why humans seek to use us upon the battlefield. Those hounds of the Bakufu would surely do the same to you, sooner or later."

It might have been a baseless warning, but the fact that she was already acting as a messenger ever so often for the Shinsen-Gumi was already a tell-tale sign of it. If they had not sought to use her as an Oni, they even dared to use her to their advantage, being a young girl, as their spy in Shimabara. If that was not the case, a page like her should not have seen open combat. It was needless and a waste of time for them to do so.

"They will not!" she countered. "Each and every one of them have dreams to become real warriors. They might lose their way somewhat, but stillâ€¦"

"Then their path is long and arduous," he offered. "Being a perfect warrior takes strength, and humans are weak." In no way that he was implying that even he could be a warrior that the Shinsen-Gumi sought to be. He had never seen himself as a soldier anyways. He was merely doing what he was born and raised to do. Chizuru seemed to have given up debating with him, and followed him all the way home. Soon enough, they reached the back entrance of the Nishi Hongan-Ji.

Chizuru bowed her thanks to him. "We have already arrived, thank youâ€¦"

He smiled and nodded towards her. Before he left her company, he told her, "I will leave the capital for a short period of time. The next time I see you, I will take you with me, whether or not you are willing to follow." He did not wait for her to reply to his words and went on his way. The ship back to Kagoshima would set sail in the morning, and it would do him well to return to the Satsuma lodgings as soon as possible.

On his way back, Kazama felt a strong wind blow towards him, rustling the trees, and blowing the clouds away from the night sky, revealing the stars and the crescent moon. Looking forwards, he saw the one and only Hijikata Toshizou, ready to face him in combat. "There is no need for a fight," he said to Hijikata. "Without Yukimura Chizuru here, I have no business with you."

It would seem that his words only managed to incense Hijikata. Scowling, Hijikata roared, "What do you want with her?"

"There is no need for me to explain," Kazama answered. "A mere human like you will not be able to comprehend her worth."

"I will not wield neither Chizuru nor the capital to you so easily!" Hijikata hissed, ready to attack. It would seem that the point of anger for him was more Chizuru than the capital itself. Knowing this,

Kazama easily recognized that Hijikata was most likely his direct rival for Chizuru's heart, a viable suitor for her hand. Mirroring his movements, Kazama also begun to attack, but their duel was not to be, because a third man who had emerged from the shadows, tall and bespectacled held the hilt of Hijikata's katana before he could even strike.

The stranger said to Hijikata, "Hijikata-kun, there is no wisdom in attacking him now!" If there had been an open assault between that of the agents of the Bakufu and the Sat-Chou Alliance, it would be case for war to start. Peace in Kyoto now hung by a thread. The chessboard would be thrown into utter disarray if either of them would strike, an outcome that no one could predict. Knowing that the stranger was right, Hijikata backed down. Then, turning towards Kazama, the stranger said, "I am Sannan, the General Commander of the Shinsen-Gumi. I have heard many tales of you from various placesâ€¦ shall we not call it a day?"

However, even with the presence of the stranger, Kazama was not willing to let the matter rest. Not when he finally realized just what Sannan was. He should have realized it earlierâ€¦ "You are not human," Kazama hissed towards Sannan. He was a Rasetsu, a false Oni. "Most likely you are one of the many failed experimentsâ€¦" Changing his target from Hijikata to Sannan, he delivered his stroke from the high guard, only to be intercepted by Hijikata. Many more bouts ensued, but the victor could not be seen.

Ultimately, the one that stopped the duel from going further was Amagiri, who restrained Kazama by the hand. "Kazama, you have taken this game a little too far," Amagiri warned, and just rightly. Knowing that he no longer had any quarrel with Hijikata and Sannan, Kazama sheathed his katana and disappeared into the night, leaving Amagiri behind him, no doubt, giving the human and the false Oni an apologetic bow before following him in his footsteps.

Soon, he would show the Shinsen-Gumi the hopelessness in their efforts of creating such monsters. Soon, he would take Chizuru away from them directly under their watch.

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><p>HAN: WHEW! This was a long chapter indeed! It covers the second half of Kazama's Sekkaroku OVA, riddled with a little of Hijikata's at the end. I hope it brings enough momentum for the very moment Kazama attacks the Nishi Hongan-Ji, marking the beginning of the Quest. Just a little more, and we'll see just how Chizuru deals with the choice of following Kazama or staying with the Shinsen-Gumi.

AnnaChan310: He's just an arrogant bastard and needs to learn how to behave. Thank God he has Amagiri to rein him in when he goes overboard.

Arysen: Oh hello there! Nice to see you again! Please do stick around for the coming chapters, heh heh!

20. The Acceptance

The time Kazama had spent back in Satsuma took longer than he had

thought. He did not anticipate the delays that moving from Kagoshima Bay to Sakurajima could have had, much of it having to do with the defenses of the location of the new Kazama village. When the immediate copy of the Kazama manor upon Sakurajima was completed, new plots of land for the crops that they would sow had to be cleared, and that took some time. On the way back north, he also had tour the villages controlled by the Amagiri clan, to discuss their defenses with Amagiri Kazutarou and his kin. All in all, it took him three months and much of spring to start his return journey to Kyoto, but was instead summoned by his superiors to remain in Kyushu.

"We've entered some very interesting negotiations these past months," Saigo Takamori told Kazama and Amagiri when they met him in Kagoshima. "It would seem that the Shinsen-Gumi will once again be broken into two."

Amagiri did not understand Saigo's foreshadowing. "Why would that happen?" he asked suspiciously. The Shinsen-Gumi were famous for being nothing less than they were, a pack of wolves. It was said that however brash and uncouth their existence had been, they had come from nothing and found one another amongst utter hardship. The bonds between the members of the Shinsen-Gumi were supposed to be the strongest among that of the Bakufu's agents because of it.

"You have heard of their military advisor, Itou Kashitarou, have you not?" Saigo said plainly. Both the Oni nodded. "Well then, the man has Toubaku leanings to put it gently, and he had decided to make them known soon."

Kazama sighed. "He plans to sell himself to us and break away from the Shinsen-Gumi," he concluded. "Most likely, he had bought over a sizable portion of men for his cause and has the confidence to forge his own path. Do we seriously want an ally like that, Saigo?"

Saigo raised an eyebrow. "We need all the allies we can get, Kazama," he answered. "I hope that you and Amagiri are able to attend to our next meeting with such an esteemed future-colleague of ours." If words did not have multiple meanings, it would have meant that Saigo merely wanted them to resume their original duties as high-profile bodyguards. Sadly, words had multiple meanings, and the ulterior one was also clear. He wanted them to see Itou Kashitarou in person for themselves, to obtain a general feel of the man. After all, he had learned to trust the keen senses of the Oni, and would want them to report to him any abnormalities the man had.

"Understood," Kazama replied singly, knowing that Itou Kashitarou would not disappoint at all.

* * *

><p>Late February of the Third Year of Keio (March 1867)<p>

The last round of negotiations between the Satsuma-han and Itou Kashitarou occurred in Dazaifu city of the Fukuoka-han. It had been the regional administration center of the Bakufu in Kyushu, and was where the Bakufu extended its power to the third largest island of Japan. However, in the weakening hold of the Bakufu, it was treated as a neutral area where both agents of the Bakufu and those that wish to bring it to ruins could meet in the open.

Of course, Kazama and Amagiri were present at such a meeting, silently watching as it played out. It seemed to them that there was more to Itou Kashitarou than his apparent charm and charisma. Long-haired and fashionably dressed, he had an air of dangerousness about him, because his expression was utterly unreadable. All throughout the meeting, he kept a calm and composed stance, fanning himself as he spoke, as if he were a trained geiko. Every movement he had made, every word uttered was deliberate, a construction of ability and confidence.

Saigo and Itou had been drinking when Saigo finally presented Itou with an obscene amount of money for a man whose occupation had been a scholarly kenjutsu instructor. "With the support of your honored han, I would be able to do as I please to great effect," Itou said with gratitude laced in his voice. Of course, the money was not all for him. If he was wise, he would have used a portion of that sum to bribe certain individuals thatâ€¦ needed persuasion.

"But of course," Saigo replied. "We simply cannot tolerate the fact that a fellow Imperialist has to remain under the wing of the Bakufu dogs. We are confident that you would be able to play your part well."

Itou chuckled. "Such praiseâ€¦ I would have to work harder then." A bout of laughter erupted between the two men, and Saigo poured more sake into Itou's saucer.

"I seem to have heard someâ€¦ astonishing rumors about the Shinsen-Gumi as well," Saigo added. "But I am sure that you would know all about themâ€¦"

"Oh, and what are these astonishing rumors, pray tell?" Itou asked.

Kazama was not interested in knowing what Saigo had to say to Itou further. Besides, he was the one who told Saigo that Sannan Keisuke was alive, not dead as was reported. Bowing his leave, he opened the door and entered the courtyard of the administrative complex, with Amagiri following closely.

"Kazama, where are you going?" Amagiri demanded. "We've not yet completed our guard dutyâ€¦"

"There is no need for that anymore," Kazama answered. "We have no compulsion to accompany them in their drinking." He decided to retreat back to his family manor, where there was much work to be done. He would rather prepare for more important things before him. "Amagiri, we should bring Chizuru to our side as soon as possible. There is no reason for her to stay in the Shinsen-Gumi any longer," he told his confidant and companion on the way home. If Itou Kashitarou did manage to split the Shinsen-Gumi, it would mean that the peasant samurai would have gained another enemy. He would not know who in the Shinsen-Gumi would follow the likes of Itou, but he understood from the previous conversation that those involved could possibly count one or two members of its administration, which warranted the amount of gold that had been given to Itou. The number of her protectors would lessen, which did not warrant him any confidence that they could protect her any better than he could.

Amagiri agreed with him. "We must be patient," he warned Kazama. "If you bring her to your side, then what excuse would you give those above us?"

"The truth," Kazama said, with the trademark sideways grin of his family prominent upon him. "I'll find some property in the capital and tell them it is to house my future wife." Needless to say, he would omit the fact that said future wife was actually serving in the Shinsen-Gumi as a page. "Surely, they would not begrudge me that?"

There was no choice but for Amagiri to agree with him. "Still I would advise caution and patience," he stressed. Kazama was not a foolish man, but his lack of patience would be his downfall. He could barely count the number of times that Kazama could have set this human conflict into greater turmoil if he had not been there to stop him before Kazama kills the wrong person at the wrong time.

"Hmph, suit yourself," Kazama replied. If he were to retrieve Chizuru from the Shinsen-Gumi, he would have to launch a full attack on their headquarters. An irony, that in winter, he had managed to aid her in collecting information about a bunch of rowdy roshi who were about to do the same. It would also mean that if he decided to engage the Shinsen-Gumi in open battle, they would also have to utilize the Rasetsu they hadâ€¦ it would give him the opportunity to get rid of the false Oni as well, effectively killing two birds with one stone.

Not long after his return to Kyoto, Kazama had acquired a simple residence in the city to house himself, Amagiri and also Chizuru, if she was willing. Although not as extravagant as the Kazama manor in Kagoshima, it wasâ€¦ serviceable, with a tree-lined garden and being far away from the military offices of the city. Of course, he would have to make his move known to the Satsuma-han. Many of them had wondered why he was moving away from the shared lodgings that they had all stayed in, and when he told them that he was to marry a girl that he had been betrothed to, they all beamed and congratulated him, although he doubted their sincerity.

* * *

><p>Late summer in the Third Year of Keio (1867)<p>

Emperor Koumei finally succumbed to illness, and the capital was once again unstable. The Imperial Court then issued secret orders throughout the government, one of which reached the bowels of the Shinsen-Gumi headquarters, citing a need to for able warriors to guard the newly-interred emperor's tomb.

The Goryo Eiji had been formed when Itou Kashitarou finally played his last card as the military advisor of the Shinsen-Gumi. After personally seeing Sannan Keisuke, who had been presumed dead, before his very eyes during a freak accident in the Nishi Hongan-Ji, Itou engineered a mutiny against the central commanders of the Shinsen-Gumi, citing that he had received orders to guard the Imperial Tombs following Emperor Koumei's passing. Fearing that their clandestine, Bakufu-ordered activities would be revealed, as threatened by Itou, Kondou Isami, the Commander of the Shinsen-Gumi had no choice but to allow Itou and his cohorts to leave. With him, went the Captains of the Third and Eighth Division, Saito Hajime and

Todou Heisuke, effectively thinning out the members of Shinsen-Gumi's leadership.

Kazama was aware that Sen-hime had approached the Shinsen-Gumi shortly after the Goryo Eiji had left the Nishi Hongan-Ji. Most likely, she tried to warn the paltry peasant-folk of his wishes to make Chizuru his bride, offering to protect Chizuru in their stead. However, he also knew that Sen-hime and her Suzumori bodyguard left the temple without their quarry. It had been a first for the Princess of the Oni interfering in the affairs of any Oni clan. However, he could not blame Sen-hime, for she was still young, and believed that she was only helping Chizuru in the only way she knew how.

"So, we're really going to attack the wolves' den?" Shiranui asked Kazama the very moment they approached the Nishi Hongan-Ji. "We're not just walking in and politely asking for the girl's hand, since you've every right to do so?"

Kazama harrumphed. "If you want me to surrender my head to the Shimazu clan for marrying someone from the Shinsen-Gumi, be my guest," he returned. "My condition would be that you be adopted into my family and complete my duties."

"That's worse than dying, I think. I refuse the offer," Shiranui chuckled. He had always enjoyed his freedom of being merely the beloved nephew of his clan's leader. It was not so much of the prestige, but the ability to go wherever he wanted and do whatever he wanted at his own pace and design, while knowing the amount of work one actually had to do as a clan-leader made him rather grateful that he was only eighth in line of the succession of his own clan.

Amagiri turned towards the two and silenced them. "We might be spotted," he warned them, but instead, Kazama took a great step forwards. "Kazama, what are you?"

"Let them see us," Kazama argued. "I want those Bakufu dogs to see what real Oni are capable of." Their mission that night was two-fold. The first was to retrieve Chizuru while the second was to destroy as many of the Rasetsu that the Shinsen-Gumi had as they could. He had already told the Oni Council that he would not stand for the existence of those false Oni and cared not for their lack of attitudes towards them just to grant a wayward Oni some closure.

Sighing, Amagiri replied, "As you wish." There would be no more words that could sway Kazama away from what he had decided to do. Without a moment's delay, he gave one powerful punch towards the great wooden doors of the temple, crushing it into mere splinters while Shiranui shot down the two door-guards behind it. It was enough to rouse the denizens of the headquarters of the Shinsen-Gumi from their sleep.

The response was quick. They had merely entered through the gate when several combatants, dressed in asagi-iro haori, appeared, ready for combat. However, they were harder to kill than most men, which meant that they were no what they seemed to be.

"They are fakes," Kazama proclaimed, and as he said those words, more came towards them, led by Sannan, the Rasetsu that Kazama had met

before leaving for Kagoshima in the winter.

"We have been waiting for you," Sannan proclaimed, his hair turning white and his eyes blood-red, baring his teeth. "We, the Rasetsu Corps of the Shinsen-Gumi will be the opponents of the Oni." The Rasetsu charged at all three of the Oni, engaging them in combat, but Kazama was quick to reveal their weakness, having had experience in dealing with them.

Using the wakizashi of one of the Rasetsu, he pierced it through the beast's heart and repeated the action for the one behind him. "They die if you hit their vital organs," he explained to Shiranui, who had never faced them in combat before. Getting the hint, Shiranui started to change his aim and managed to get rid of at least a few more Rasetsu than he originally thought possible.

"Their creation is an act of utter disgrace," Amagiri commented, knocking as many down as he could. However, their main concern was not the Rasetsu. As Hijikata, the spearman Harada and Nagakura Shinpachi, Captain of the Second Division were sighted, Kazama knew that it was time to seek out his bride.

"I'll leave this to you two," Kazama told his companions. Naturally, they got his meaning and stayed in the main courtyard while he disappeared into the shadows, looking for Chizuru. He found her foolishly running into the battlefield even as a man was trying to keep her from getting out of her quarters.

"Yukimura-kun, the Fukuchou has ordered you to stay where it's safe!" the man warned Chizuru but to no avail. The girl not only had courage, but she had a tendency to want to be where the fighting was, because she knew that somehow, she had to bear the responsibility of the carnage that was being wrought in their very home.

"They are coming for me, I must help!" Chizuru exclaimed, trying to move past the man. However, she turned speechless when she realized that Kazama was near them. Truly, she did not expect that he would come for her at all.

The foolish human thought that he had any chance of defending her. "Stand back, Yukimura-kun," he told the girl and unsheathed his katana, charging towards Kazama, who easily parried his attack and kicked him square in the chest, rendering him unconscious.

"Shimada-san!" Chizuru cried out, but to no avail. Knowing that she would have to defend herself, her hand flew to the hilt of her wakizashi as she stepped away from Kazama. "That's enough!"

"Do you want to know what happened to your family, Chizuru?" Kazama asked her, even as she unsheathed the Shoutsuuren, thinking that she could actually face him in a duel. It would be a futile attempt, no doubt, but Kazama had no intention to indulge in such a possibility. "Sen-hime must have told you how your family was destroyedâ€|"

At that moment, Chizuru hesitated. "â€| how would you know?" she demanded. "I don't believe you!" There was anger in her eyes. At that point in time, he was her enemy. He had entered her home, raised his katana against her guardians, her friends, and she would not submit to him, no matter what he had promised.

Knowing that she would not come with him without a fight, Kazama hit her with the hilt of his katana right under her ribs, causing her to fall into his arms. She would not wake for a good while. Carrying her into his arms, he whispered into her ear, "Come with me and all shall be revealed."

With his prize in his arms, Kazama walked back towards the courtyard, where Sannan and Harada were fighting Amagiri and Shiranui respectively. "Oi, do you have to be so rough?" Shiranui asked Kazama when he saw Chizuru unconscious in Kazama's arms, knowing full well that he was the culprit.

"There is no more reason for her to remain here," Kazama answered. "Come, it is time for us to leave."

Hijikata would not stand for it and immediately delivered a thrust aimed towards Kazama's neck, an attack easily avoided due to Kazama's agility as a highly-abled Oni warrior, even if he was carrying Chizuru. Again and again, Hijikata failed to find an opening, and in the end, Kazama decided to put Chizuru down onto the ground to properly face him.

"You Oni are an interesting bunch of bastards," Hijikata said confidently, clearly confirming that Sen-hime had indeed warned the Shinsen-Gumi that Kazama had designs on Chizuru beforehand. "You dare to attack our home so easily? do honestly think that I would tolerate any more of your nonsense?"

Harrumphing as he lazily parried Hijikata's attacks, Kazama explained, "Yukimura Chizuru's worth can only be discovered if she comes with me." The flare of Hijikata's Ki, the increasing desperation of his movements only made Kazama realize just how unwilling this man was to let Chizuru go. If he had given his heart to her, Hijikata had not made any mention of it, which meant that was a chance that Chizuru could be his, Kazama thought. He did not know whether he should thank the human for his foolishness or not.

"Tell it to Enma in the netherworld," Hijikata hissed. "I will never surrender her to the likes of you!" It was a proclamation made not only to fall upon Kazama's ears. It was meant for to be heard by the whole world. "She is a ward of the Shinsen-Gumi, and you will not take her away under our watch!"

As the seconds passed, Kazama realized more and more that Hijikata was a fool when it came to his own heart, an advantage to him that should not have existed at all. If Chizuru knew what he had known, if she chose to stay under those circumstances, he would leave her willingly. Thankfully, the circumstances were in his favor. He still had a chance.

"Nor will I allow her to be surrounded by such meaningless fakes!" Kazama hissed, raising his katana high and changing his target. Instead of Hijikata, he leapt high into the air, moving towards Sannan instead. The Rasetsu had no chance of defending himself against the leader of the Oni in the west of Japan, and was soon beaten to the ground. When the dust had settled, Kazama pointed his katana downwards, ready for the kill.

"Sannan-san!" Hijikata shouted, running towards the Rasetsu, but was

hit back by Kazama before he even knew it. Rolling backwards, he lost hold of his own katana and struggled to stand. When he could, he realized that Kazama was already inches in front of him. However, he could feel a strange warmth surrounding him, somehow stopping Kazama in his tracks.

"Stop!" Chizuru shouted, clearly awake. Brandishing her wakizashi, she came between Hijikata and Kazama, not knowing the outcomes that her actions would cause.

Hijikata put his arms around her defensively. "Oi baka!" he scolded her. "Do not rush into things you have no business with!" She did not move, but neither did he.

Nevertheless, Kazama walked towards her. Instead of raising his katana to her, he raised his hand, facing his palm downwards. It was an invitation. As he had done at the Ikedaya, he engulfed both of them in a dazzling bubble of many-colored lights, causing their hair to turn white and their eyes amber in color, even as Hijikata held onto her with dear life. "Your father named you after a thousand cranes because he wished to see you free and happy," Kazama told Chizuru. Naturally, she would not know if he was talking about Chizo, but it mattered not now. "You were born in the mountains of the Tohoku region, in the stronghold that was the Yukimura manor, where meadows green ran wide, nourished by sparkling rivers."

Chizuru gasped at those words, her hands flying to cover her mouth as if she was trying to stifle a cry. Could she have remembered anything at that moment? No one could have known Hijikata looked at her, and so did the other peasants posing as wolves. She did not make a sound, but she no longer seemed to resist Kazama's words at all.

"Chizuru!" Nagakura called towards her, but Kazama gave no notice to him.

"Take my hand and I will tell you all that you want to know," Kazama pressed on. "These peasants cannot give you what your heart truly seeks— A family and a home. You have searched for it here in the capital, finding nothing, have you not?" He seemed to have hit where he should have hit a long time ago. He had long suspected that she would be in search for Koudou, the only other remaining Yukimura, but with Koudou now siding with Choushu, the chances of her seeing her last remaining relative were fewer by the moment.

"Don't, Chizuru—" Hijikata murmured when she inched forwards towards Kazama. When she broke free of him, he could only stand and watch. "Chizuru!"

Chizuru steeled herself. Knowing that her heart would break if she looked back, she told Kazama, "If it's me you want, it's me you'll have." Regarding Kazama with the ferocity that she would one day be in utter control of, she sheathed the Shoutsuuren. "Please— spare Hijikata-san and the others. Spare the Shinsen-Gumi."

"Chizuru, you're staying with us!" Harada shouted, trying to convince her to stay. However, Kazama knew, just by looking into those large, honey-colored eyes of hers, that she had already made up her mind.

When the tips of her fingers touched that of his, Kazama clasped her

hand in his. "Very well then," he said and sheathed his katana as well, calling off the attack. "You may say your goodbyes."

Knowing that it might be the last time she would see them in her life, Chizuru turned towards Hijikata, Nagakura, Harada and Sannan, giving them all a deep bow of thanks. "Arigatou. I can't be a burden to all of you anymore," she told them. "You've been so kind to meâ€| all of youâ€| It's the only thing I can do to repay you."

Having said thus, she turned towards Kazama and nodded. Amagiri and Shiranui walked towards the broken gate of the Nishi Hongan-Ji, with her closely behind them. Kazama was the last to leave, knowing that he had at least succeeded in half of his great duties in the capital.

They of the Shinsen-Gumi were still calling after Chizuru even when they had already stepped out of the temple. Chizuru had been soâ€| fatigued by her separation from her former protectors that she fainted into his arms. Wordlessly carrying her, Kazama and Amagiri started to walk towards their lodgings for the night. For him, at least the journey towards realizing his promise to Yukimura Chizo had ended. He had at least managed to keep her safe, far away from the fire and fight that would finally tear their nation into a state of civil war.

Now that the journey to find and retrieve her was over, his quest to win her heart and wed her had begun.

* * *

><p>HAN: HEH HEH HEH, did you see what I did with that last sentence? Yes, dear readers, this is the end of this fic. I spent days and days wondering how to write this, and finally, it came through. It was quite the challenge, writing an entire story on Kazama and the Oni, mainly because there's just so little material about them, even with what could be derived from Toki No Kizuna. I know that many of you were expecting some lovey-dovey scenes between Chizuru and Kazama, but I would think that at this point of Hakuouki, Chizuru could have seen Kazama as a threat to the Shinsen-Gumi because he was always on the opposite side of the chessboard. I also decided to make it a point to reiterate time and again that Kazama was so adamant in marrying Chizuru because it was what he promised her father to do. If it were just a normal contract, and Chizuru was once thought to be dead, he would not have been so keen on marrying her. There had got to be some reason, other than the fact that she was a pure-blooded female Oni with an influential surname that was the sole reason why Kazama kept pursuing Chizuru, as well as wanting to make the Shinsen-Gumi look like fools, especially since he kept going on and on about Oni keeping their promises. As for this chapter itself, I did base it on most of Episode 9 of the anime, with a bit of action from Kyoto Ranbu. I also felt that it was important for Kazama to somehow... convince Chizuru to follow him, not only because he used the Shinsen-Gumi as leverage, so I decided to add something about her wanting to know about her family, especially since Sen-hime forbade him to take her away by force.<p>

[Note: If you guys have not yet read "The Quest", you can do so now! Let's see, I have a few great battle scenes, some mushy Hijikata pining for Chizuru and vice versa scenes, more Kazama awesomeness, and a little ruby-eyed surprise at the end! So please do check it out

if you want to know what happened after Chizuru took Kazama's hand! As an added bonus, it's an AU so none of the Shinsen-Gumi boys die, yay! It's quite a shameless plug, but you know, this was the prequel so it would make excellent sense to give you people a little teaser, heh heh.]

Arysen: Well, the real romance would always be in the Quest because it's how Kazama manages to win her over. It would be... kinda nonsensical to have any form of romantic interaction between the two now because Chizuru'd still be deathly afraid of Kazama after what she's seen him do, heh heh. Thanks for loving this one as much as the last!

CloudCarnivore: Too bad that Kaoru is not pleased at all to meet him! Thanks for sticking around, and I do hope that you check out the Quest if you have the time!

End
file.